

'The Ant-Men of Tibet'

by Stephen
Baxter

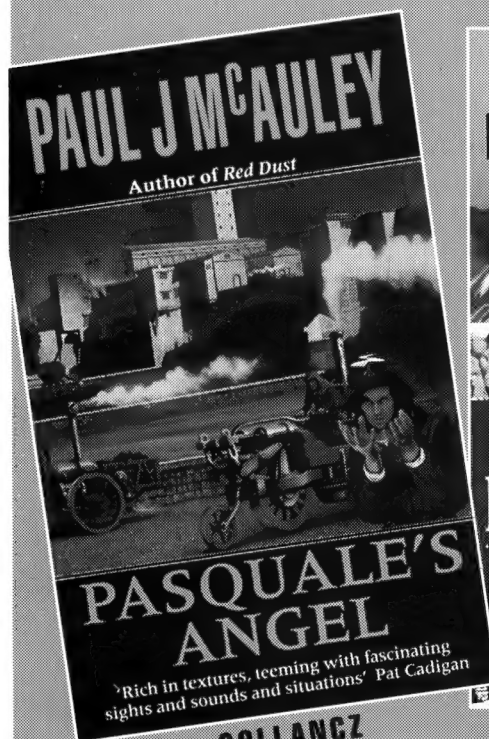
Plus new
stories by
John Grant
Ian Watson
and others

**Algis
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interview

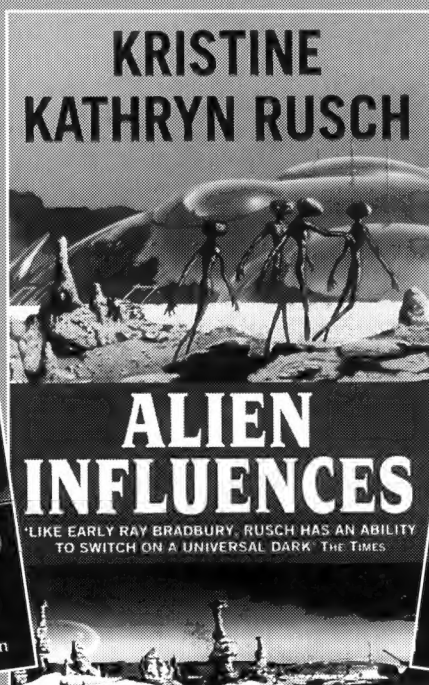




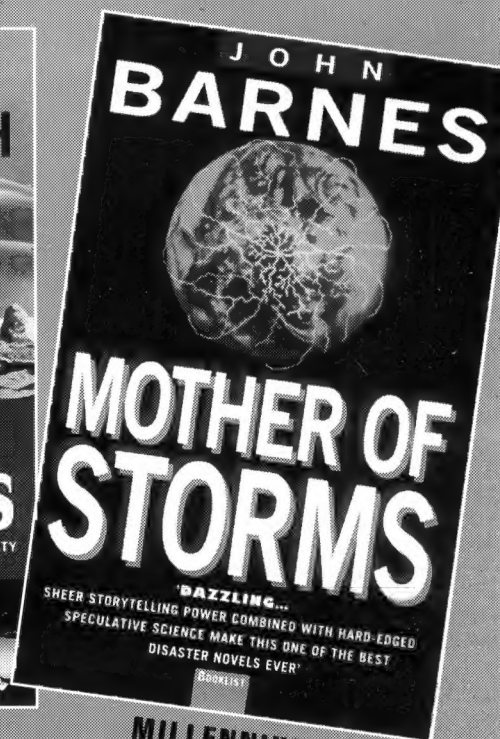
SHORTLIST FOR THE BEST SF NOVEL PUBLISHED IN THE UK



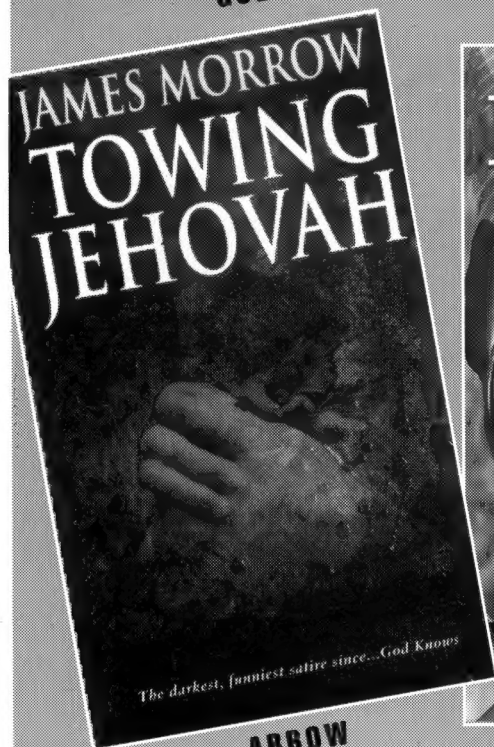
GOLLANCZ



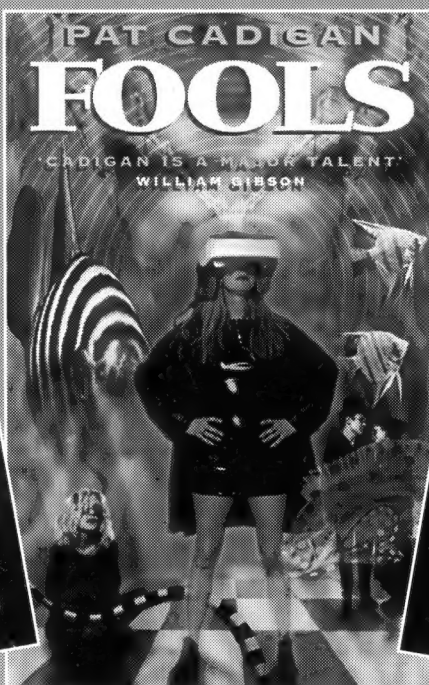
MILLENNIUM



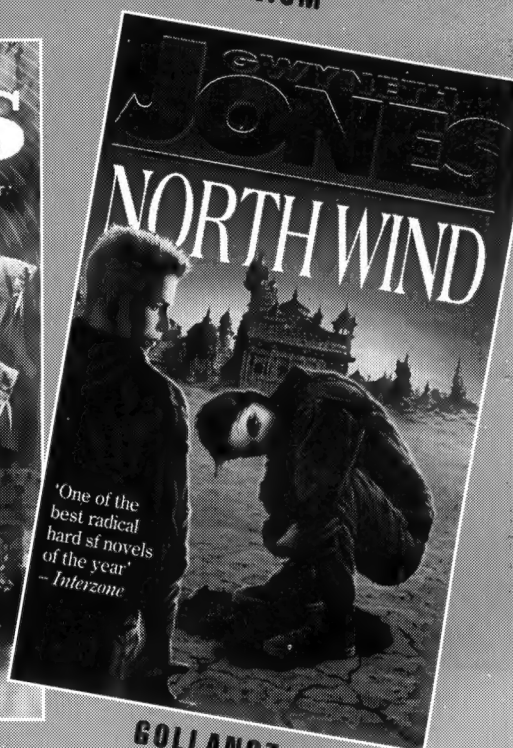
MILLENNIUM



ARROW



HARPERCOLLINS



GOLLANCZ

The winner will be announced on April 20th

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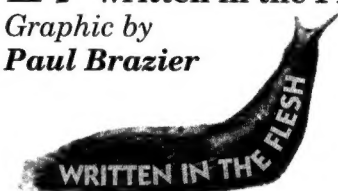
CONTENTS

Fiction

- 6** STEPHEN BAXTER
The Ant-Men of Tibet
Illustrations by SMS



- 27** SYLVIA M. SIDDALL
Written in the Flesh
Graphic by Paul Brazier



- 31** IAN WATSON
Ahead!

- 38** WILLIAM SPENCER
The Crash
Investigator

- 44** JOHN GRANT
The Glad Who Sang A
Mermaid In From
The Probability Sea
Illustrations by Russell Morgan



Features

- 4** INTERACTION
Readers' Letters

- 23** ALGIS BUDRYS
interviewed by
Sally Ann Melia



- 35** NICK LOWE AND
JANE KILICK
Film & TV Reviews



- 43** DAVID LANGFORD
Ansible Link

- 58** PAUL MCAULEY,
BRIAN STABLEFORD,
CHRIS GILMORE, AND
PAUL BEARDSLEY
Book Reviews

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Interaction

Dear Editors:

I just finished Katharine Kerr's fine story "Asylum" in *Interzone* 90, about a military coup in the United States. As one of those evil "liberals" from San Francisco, I identified with Janet and her predicament. Even today, it is very easy to feel isolated out here on our peninsula, in one of the few remaining redoubts of civilization. We are surrounded by a Republican horde that roams the mainland freeways armed to the teeth, slaughtering each other — and occasionally us — from the plush seats of their metal steeds. It seems, sometimes, that they are almost at the gates of our fair city.

However, I do have one comment from the defending trenches. I think that a monolithic military coup of the sort described by Ms Kerr is extremely unlikely in this country. The current generation of military officers, at least, appear to take the idea of civilian leadership, and their oaths, very seriously. Sometimes, they seem like one of the last segments of American society that still believes in the Constitution and what it stands for.

A civilian coup — like Hitler's in Germany — strikes me as more credible. The name Gingrich comes to mind. Among the American population at large, the institutions of democratic government are totally discredited. Some people appear ready to pay any price for "security," while others are perfectly willing to subvert the rule of law to force their own particular views on everyone else (and here, we liberals are almost as much to blame as the religious right). The times are very ripe for an ideologue like Gingrich to decide that he knows better than anyone else what is wrong with America — and with Americans.

Any would-be civilian dictator would present the military with an uncomfortable choice between loyalty to their Commander-in-Chief or loyalty to the Constitution. The US military is far from monolithic, and even here I think the end result is more likely to be a civil war than the sort of monolithic coup predicted by Ms Kerr.

But this is quibbling. The final outcome for "liberals" and other evil people, probably, would be very much the same. A good story that struck me very close to home.

Donald F. Robertson

San Francisco

Dear Editors:

Thought I'd try this E-Mail lark out on you [our address, for letters of comment only, is: interzone@cix.compulink.co.uk — Ed.]. I'd like to address several points, the first being the style of the magazine:

I never read *Interzone* before it changed, so I couldn't say whether it was for the better or for worse. But what you are after, as well as the continuing support of your regular readers, is for new readers to join the flock, and, as a new reader, I can see no problem with the format as it is (except maybe the higgledy-piggledy way the text is laid out). The pictures, nice as they may be, do mean space is used up when I'm sure another short story could be crammed into the mag if they were removed.

As for the stories themselves — some good, some bad. I prefer those stories with twists at the ends, like "A Friend Indeed" by David Garnett, but some stories (Greg Egan's "Mitochondrial Eve" for one) are far too technical for the likes of me. I read stories mainly for the pleasure value, not because it's a future equivalent of some in-depth science magazine. Of course, others will disagree

with me and say that technical stories are good; but everyone has their own tastes, I suppose.

As for my favourite books, I couldn't think of ten, I'm afraid. I've chosen mainly action-packed modern novels, as the older novels just get on my nerves. Why? Take, for example, Clifford Simak. At the time of writing there were certain social etiquettes that had to be upheld — like swearing was very bad indeed, women had to be protected by men, and had to obey them, etc. In one H. G. Wells novel (*First Men in the Moon?*) there is a bit where the lead character is described as looking like a peasant because he forgot his hat. *What? His hat?* In this day and age, it just sounds ridiculous. Okay, so *First Men in the Moon* was set in the early 20th century, so it gives an authentic atmosphere. But Simak's stories are set in the far future, yet the characters act as if they live in the 1940s. I usually find people in my age group (I am 18) prefer more modern novels, with a bit of sex and violence in them.

Anyway, those gripes aside, here is my Best SF list:

The War of the Worlds by H. G. Wells. Okay, so the writing style is not really to my liking, but the scope of the destruction, the totally alien technology, and that classic ending all add up to a great read.

Consider Phlebas by Iain M. Banks. My favourite author. Not just his science fiction, but his contemporary novels too (and I have them all in my collection.) This is easily his best novel, as once more the scope of the story (spanning a good eighth of the galaxy), combined with a totally different culture (called the Culture, coincidentally) and the sheer size of the Orbitals (ten million kilometres in diameter!),

helps create the best read I have ever experienced.

The Sleeping Planet by William R. Burkett. Quite an old and totally unknown story (well, I'd never heard of it before.) It is horribly corny, but also fun, about an alien race that drugs the whole of Earth, leaving only six humans awake and fit to defeat the alien invasion.

The Kraken Wakes by John Wyndham. Traces of *War of the Worlds* in this excellent novel about a menace from the deep. The ending is totally unexpected (at least it was for me.)

The Best of A. E. Van Vogt by ... guess who? Not a novel, but a collection of stories, all of which are brilliant. I've read it about five times, and still enjoy re-reading these tales.

Well, that's all my favourite books. Keep up the good work on *Interzone*. I shall be buying your mag for a long time if the format and quality of stories stay this good.

D. Barsby

Mansfield, Notts.

Editor: *Apart from the Iain Banks, your five choices don't strike us as being very "modern." But we're glad to hear to hear that at least one younger sf fan has been reading H. G. Wells in this, the centenary year of his great scientific romances.*

Dear Editors:

I have been reading science fiction over 15 years, but this list is my favourites from the last five years. Every one of these books has kicked my spine very hard, and I recommend them to anyone.

Hyperion and *The Fall of Hyperion* by Dan Simmons (1990-91). Future classics, providing good introductions to many different stripes of science fiction.

Scissors Cut Paper Wrap Stone by Ian McDonald (1993). McDonald is a wonderful new talent and I have liked all his stories, this being just one example.

Virtual Light by William Gibson (1993). Gibson is getting better and better all the time.

Feersum Endjinn by Iain M. Banks (1994). Banks is teasing his fans by writing more and more complicated stories, and is still redefining space opera.

China Mountain Zhang by Maureen F. McHugh (1992). One of the major new American female talents.

Doomsday Book by Connie Willis (1992). New views of history and peoples. Also a future classic.

Moving Mars by Greg Bear (1993). Bear is doing to hard sf what Banks is doing to space opera. Imagination and challenging sense-of-wonder.

Aristoi by Walter Jon Williams

(1992). Plato's society and nanotechnology in a swinging cocktail.

Earth by David Brin (1990). Brin's realistic view of the future. Important issues — computer networks and ecology.

Flowerdust by Gwyneth Jones (1994). A fairy tale. A perfect bedtime story — for one whose mind is wandering far away.

Steel Beach by John Varley (1993). Funny, spectacular imagination and sadness.

I also want to thank your magazine for giving me many wonderful new writers to follow. I want to thank you for Greg Egan, Stephen Baxter, Paul McAuley, Brian Stapledon and Molly Brown. Keep up the good work.

Kimrai Lehtonen
Helsinki

Editor: *I'm sure Brian Stableford will be most flattered by your reference to him as "Brian Stapledon." (You can almost imagine some distant future when two legendary 20th-century writers, O. Stapledon and B. Stableford, have become indistinguishable in the public imagination...)*

We have received many more letters with lists of readers' favourite sf books — a gratifyingly large response, which alas we haven't got room to enlarge on in this issue. Next time!

Coming next month

The popular **Eric Brown** returns with a solid new story, "A Prayer for the Dead." Another returner, and one we haven't heard from in some time, is scientist-author **Alastair Reynolds** — who gives us a fast-moving piece of hard sf set in Antarctica. There will be several other stories, plus our usual features and reviews. So look out for the June *Interzone*, on sale in May.

THE ANT-MEN OF



My friend, I have decided to tell you my story – as much of it as I remember – before I grow too lost in feebleness, or some accident overtakes me.

I have no paper, of course – save for my yellowing Shakespeare, and I have no intention of sacrificing *that* precious companion! – and so I will entrust my account to your memory, Tsi-puff. I have no doubt as to the fidelity of this recording – but, I admit before I begin, I have more concerns about the *value* of my self-imposed project. I look into the bulging eyes of these Ant-Men – and then into the vacant gaze of the tall, loping creatures who are called my “children” – and I wonder, despite the assurances of Cavor, which of them will have cause to turn, in the

uncertain future ahead, to the words of a lonely old man who has spent the bulk of his life on this strange mountain-top...

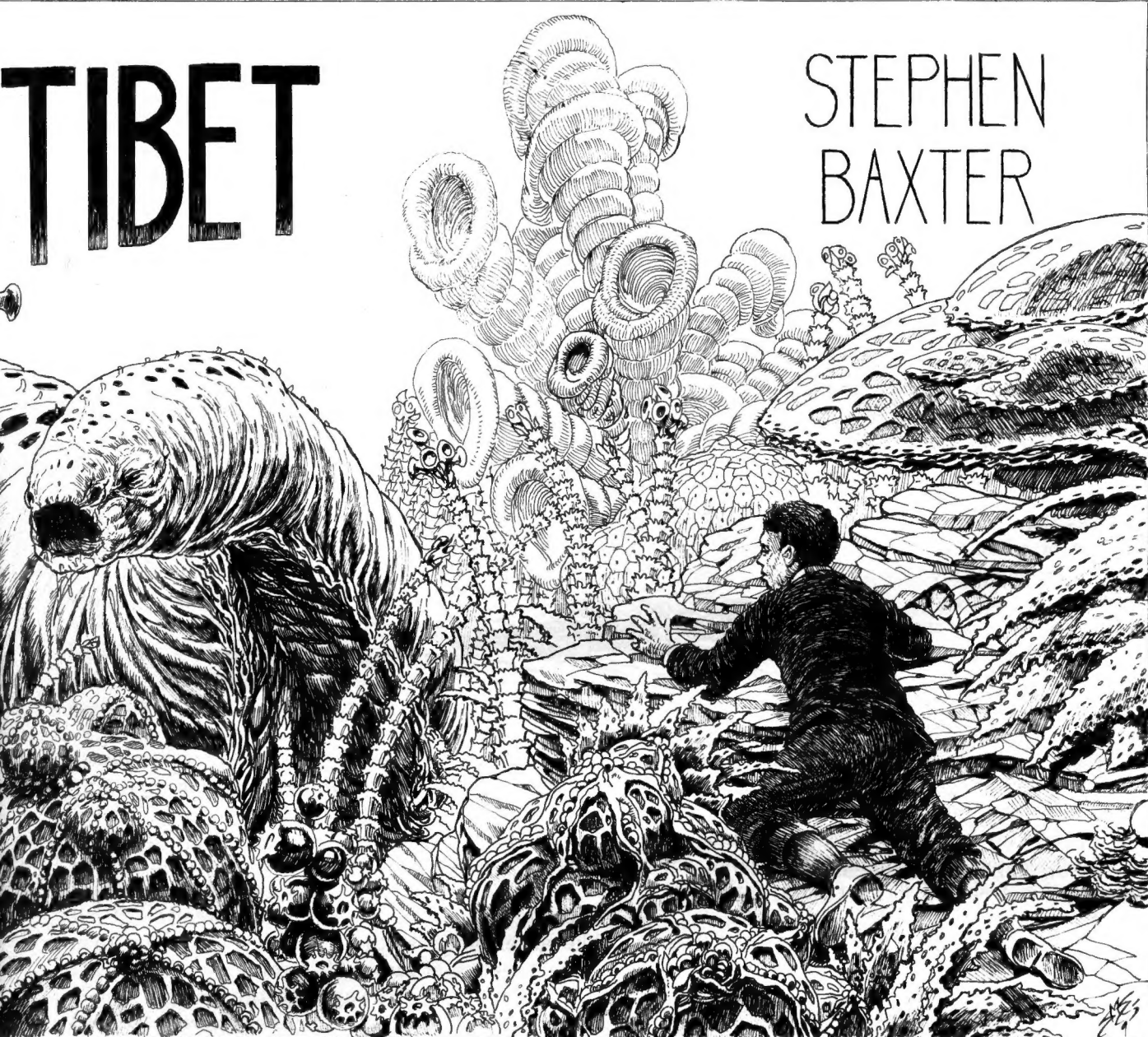
My name is Tommy Simmons. Of course I did not mean to take to the air in that wretched Bottle!

In the year 1900 I was ten years old. In April of that year, my father – a moderately successful architect, living in Clapham – took myself and my mother off for a week’s Spring holiday in Littlestone-on-Sea, a rather drab, flat little resort on the coast of Kent, just to the south of Romney Marsh.

I was an only child, and always rather solitary (a fact which, no doubt, has assisted my survival) and at Littlestone I was wont to ride off alone on my bicycle, out across the level sands. Early morning – just after dawn, when the world was empty – was my favourite time. So you must picture me on that momentous morning: under an overcast sky, rolling around on that huge landscape of sands and tidal puddles like a marble on a tabletop, my head full of a boy’s shallow, brilliant dreams...

TIBET

STEPHEN
BAXTER



Illustrations by SMS

And that was when I saw it!

It was a *Bottle* – such I immediately christened it – but a Bottle at least a dozen feet across, resting on the sand at the edge of the retreating sea. It was perhaps a quarter-mile from me.

I stopped dead, and planted my feet firmly on the sand. The sharp eyesight shared by hawks and children showed me a ball of glass, smooth and round, its dimpled surface catching the blue-grey light off the sea. A man sat on the wet sand nearby, with the waves washing over his legs. He wore what looked like pyjamas and slippers, but they were torn and stained – and now soaked by the sea – quite beyond recognition, and his hair and beard had grown quite wild and threatening. He was looking about at Littlestone with an expression of bewilderment.

I found the man's look frightening, but the lure of the situation was irresistible. I thought he might be a cast-away from a wrecked sea ship – or perhaps he was a German, involved in some extraordinary war experiment –

Stranger things happened every month in the

pages of *The Idler* or *Pearson's Magazine*.

I set off towards the Bottle; I remember how my bicycle's wheels rasped across the fine, damp grains, and my tyre-tracks snaked off behind me as straight as an arrow...

But I wasn't alone in spotting this newcomer. A short man in flannels, an early bather, approached the ragged man, and they talked for a while. Then another three bathers, younger men, strolled up and joined in. After a time the newcomer crawled through a sort of manhole into his Bottle, and he dragged out metal bars and a length of chain. The metal was a pale yellow – the colour was difficult to make out – but it looked to me like gold!

The three young men hoisted this treasure up on their shoulders, and the ragged stranger led them all up the beach towards the boarding houses there. His steps were painful, as if his legs were weighed down with a suit of lead, and his head lolled. I climbed off my bicycle and for a while I wheeled it along, tracking the men's path, perhaps a hundred yards to their right. There were two little girls

nearby, I recall, cradling their spades and watching wide-eyed.

I was torn between curiosity and fear. I was fascinated by the whole business – but when the stranger turned his shaggy head towards me, the depth of his eyes sent funk washing down my spine...

And then it occurred to me that, while this little party slogged its way up the sand, *the Bottle had been left unattended.*

I got back on my cycle and hared off across the beach, towards the edge of the sea. I heard voices behind me, but there was no pursuit save for those two little girls, who came scampering after me. Evidently the stranger thought I could do no harm with his Bottle. If only he had been right!

I came upon the Bottle just as the sun was rising out of a bank of clouds. I dropped my bicycle to the sand and pressed my face to the glass. The surface was scuffed and starred, but quite unbroken – but I could make out little of the interior of the Bottle, for the glass was so thick and bent. The hull trapped the sunlight and sent it bouncing around inside, to shine out in random directions.

I dropped to my knees – my legs and hands were immediately coated with clinging, damp sand, which ornamentation I should pay for later, I thought – and I scrambled through the open manhole.

The dimpled hull was like a house of lenses around me, distorting the sky and sand into something quite magical. The air was a little warmer than outside, and the scratch of my own breathing was loud. If you imagine sitting inside an immense bottle, you will indeed have something of the flavour of it. There was a bundle in the middle of the Bottle's base – a heap of blanket, bits of clothing, a book, and tins and boxes and rolls, all well-used and dirty – and I sat on this with my knees hugged to my chest in delight. I had all of it to myself!...

But I saw, now, those two little girls approaching, distorted into absurd misshapes by the action of the lensed glass. Jealously I cast about and came upon a sort of glass bung. I hauled my bicycle in through the valve – the aperture was just big enough, though my spokes took a battering – and I shoved the bung into the manhole. The stopper had a screw thread, and it took all my strength to turn it into place.

So I was sealed in. Those two girls squashed their noses against the glass, and paddled at the panes with their toy spades; but I laughed at them and pulled my tongue out. At length they went away.

I dug about in the pile of stuff heaped up at the bottom of the Bottle. I could make little of the bits of equipment, although I recognized a thermometer. I found three cans of food, opened; I got hold of a half-

empty can of meat in gravy and finished it off quickly, licking my fingers clean.

There were little roller-blinds fixed about the glass, I saw now, and connecting wires were fixed to the crystal walls. I found a little panel affixed with studs, un-labelled, close to the manhole; I considered this for some time – for these studs were evidently meant to be pressed, and I was just the boy to do it – but I resisted.

The sunlight was brighter now and the air was growing hot. Perhaps it was time to go: I knew that my parents would be wondering what I was up to – I would have to concoct some non-incriminating tale – and I began to fear that the ragged owner of this Bottle would return and discover me...

I set my hands on the stopper, making to unscrew it – when my childish eyes were caught again by that row of push-button studs nearby.

It was as if those wretched studs were magnetized! I watched my hands set off of their own accord... I pressed studs at random.

With a succession of snaps, roller-blinds unfurled themselves, all around the Bottle.

I was suddenly in the dark.

There was a little shudder, and a sort of whistle. I fell in a heap with my bicycle and the blankets. I had a momentary sensation of huge weight – it felt like an elephant settling on my chest – and then came a feeling of incredible lightness – of falling. I felt my bottom drift away from the smooth floor of the Bottle, and a hard, threatening shape bumped against me in the dark.

I was in mid-air. Tsi-puff, you may imagine how I screamed at my predicament! I had not the faintest idea what had happened to me; I wondered if by pushing at those studs I had opened up some pit in the earth into which I was now falling with alacrity.

I fetched up against the manhole stopper. I tried to turn the stopper, but I could not get a purchase. I decided I must have light. I scrambled about the glass walls, like a hamster in a jar, with blankets and tins tumbling about my ears. I quite lost my orientation in the complete dark and had no idea which way was up or down, and it was long seconds before I hit upon the stud panel once more.

I poked the buttons without design. A light flickered into life – I shouted with joy – it was a little glow-bulb, fixed to the wall. But, to my dismay, the thing dimmed immediately. I slammed my fist in frustration at the panel –

– and a roller-blind snapped open. Light, a brilliant grey-white, flooded into the Bottle.

My relief was immense.

I clambered around to the stopper and clung to its



inset handles. After a while, a blanket came by, swimming like some flat sort of fish; I wrapped it about me and tied it to the handles, so I should not drift off. I could see my bicycle, upended and drifting, with the wheels turning slowly, and the spokes silhouetted against the light. At length, I reasoned, this fall must finish and I would fetch up somewhere – even if the hole into which I fell went all the way through the earth and deposited me in Australia! So I clung to my handles, like a monkey to the bars of his cage, as that incredible fall went on and on.

It grew cold, and I experimented a little more with the panel. At last I felt the warmth of a heater.

Soon the air in there was quite stuffy. I remember gazing into that rectangle of illumination – it was a sort of flat white, mottled by grey shadows – I knew it could only be the sun, if I was still anywhere near Littlestone; and yet, I think, even then I knew *it could not be*. Soon I was quite hypnotized, and the pale glow seemed to fill my eyes – and it seemed, too, to be coming closer to me, ever closer...

Astonishingly, I slept.

I may have been unconscious for hours.

I grabbed after the melting shards of sleep, for fear of what I should face when I awoke. At last, though, I surfaced into awareness. Still that bleak light poured through the Bottle's single open panel, and still the blankets and other articles tumbled about within. It seemed to me that the source of that brilliant light had changed somewhat, however. It appeared closer still! It looked like an upside-down landscape, white as if coated with ice, and wrinkled by ridges and scarps. I wondered if I had been wrong about falling into the middle of the earth. I might be flying over the South Pole – perhaps my Bottle had turned into some kind of balloon...

But what of it? I think I was feeling rather bored by it all – such is the resilience of the child. My fear had gone – in fact I was growing more fearful of the terrific whacking I should receive when at last I made my way home.

Besides, I was hungry again. Clinging with one hand to my manhole stopper, I dug about in the heap of drifting provisions until I found another can, and had myself a meal of cold bacon with dumplings.

I had a raging thirst after this, but could find nothing to drink.

I became aware of a sort of shifting of the light. I glanced up sharply, and I saw that a range of mountains was passing beyond the window. Those bare peaks reminded me of an edge of jagged bone; they seemed close enough to touch, and I felt renewed fear – if my balloon-Bottle scraped against one of those awful escarpments, I should be dashed to pieces in a moment!

I reached over to the control panel and pressed buttons at random. Blinds rolled up all over the Bottle, one after the other. Most of the blinds revealed mere rectangles of darkness, but I uncovered two new sources of brilliance. One was a warm yellow glow – unmistakably sunlight – gentle and friendly, and I worked at the studs until I had uncovered

more of this. The sun was partnered by another source: it was a cold, blue light which I did not understand. I shut out the view of those forbidding mountains – if I could not see them, I suppose I reasoned, perhaps they would go away.

The blankets, my bicycle, the boxes and cans, now started to drift off towards the panels of sunlight, like moths towards a window-pane...

And then – quite unexpected – there was a thud!

I clattered against a wall, and blankets and cans fell all around me. Suddenly I was rolling, bumping against the hull and against the larger items of luggage. It seemed to me that the Bottle was rolling down some slope, for the yellow and blue lights wheeled crazily about, and I caught glimpses of a rocky, colourful hillside beyond the opened windows. The Bottle shuddered periodically, as if it were coming off the rocks.

At last the Bottle crashed on top of some plant – a huge orange bulk like a fungus – that burst all about the Bottle, scattering seeds in every direction; and the Bottle came to rest.

I pushed away blankets and cans and sat up. The feeling of renewed weight, of a *floor* to everything, was a great relief –

And then I became aware that the Bottle was slowly, steadily, lifting itself out of the fungus.

I squealed and scrambled for the control panel. I had no desire to go drifting off again. Blinds snapped to and fro and the Bottle juddered about; but at last I had rolled up all the blinds and the Bottle settled back into its fungus.

I was badly frightened, and shaken about; and I sat on top of my overturned bicycle and peered out through the curved hull at the world into which I had been pitched.

It seemed to me I was at the top of a mountain – or perhaps on the edge of a volcano mouth, for this was a summit indented at the top by a deep, circular Pit. The Bottle had come to rest inside the lip of this Pit, perhaps twenty yards from the jagged crest. The sun was high in a sky tinged yellow, and I could see the moon. (At least I *thought* it was the moon; it was a large disc, tinged blue and brown.) There was not a sound from beyond the glass – not a breath of wind, not a cow-bell.

I fished for another can of food (it was the last, although I thought little of this at the time). My fear soon subsided, and I began to feel restless, curious. I knew that I should stay close to the Bottle, for when my rescuers came (and I never doubted they would) their search would be centred on this great sphere of glass. But, I told myself, that did not preclude me getting out and taking a look around – I needn't go far...

Perhaps it was folly, Tsi-puff – but I could not have stayed cooped up in that Bottle for another minute – not in the middle of all that peculiar scenery!

Soon I was working at the manhole stopper with a will. It was stiff and heavy to turn, but not so impossible as earlier; there was a whistling, like a boiling

kettle, and, briefly, I suffered stabbing pains in my ears. As the stopper came out of the valve, the whistling diminished, and my breath misted before me.

Below the opened valve there was a thin scattering of snow. I got my legs over the edge of the valve, and when I dropped through, my shoes crunched pleasantly into ice.

I clambered through the ruins of that fungus, out from under the Bottle. The ice and exposed rocks were cold against my bare hands. The sun was low in the sky and quite dazzling. The air was sharp – a nice contrast to the fug of the bottle – and bits of snow lay everywhere, though the sun was warm on my face. This contrast of warmth and cold was striking and highly pleasurable – if you think of the feel of sunlight on a frosty morning, you'll have something of it – and I felt rather light-headed.

The Pit's floor was a plain of boulders perhaps a half-mile wide. The wall of the Pit was not so much a solid ring as a chain of steep hillocks, I saw now, with cruel-looking escarpments and ridges. The Bottle rested on one of these hillocks. The hillocks reminded me of photographs I had seen of the slag-heaps surrounding coal-pits, and I wondered if they were artificial – they might be piles of debris left over from the excavation of this Pit.

In the purple shadows of the hillocks I saw mist and frost lingering, and the soil was uniformly covered with vegetation: there were more of the orange puff-ball fungi I had landed in, plantations of small, brown-spiked plants, and a whole army of colourful cacti and lichens. And where the rock was exposed, I saw it was white, but streaked with a golden colour.

There were no signs anywhere of people or animals.

I walked a little way down the hill. I picked up handfuls of snow – huge, complex flakes softened against my skin – and I crammed handfuls of it into my mouth. It was bitterly cold, but I held it under my tongue until it melted, and then swallowed the water down. It tasted oddly sweet, but clean enough.

I determined to climb to the crest of the hill, and get a better view of the surrounding countryside.

I went back to the Bottle and dragged out my bicycle. I inspected the machine critically. Several of the spokes of the front wheel had become loose or bent, and the front tyre was burst. Fortunately, though, in a saddlebag I carried a little hand-pump, and rubber patches and gum, and I set to repairing all this with a will.

Thus you must picture me, sitting with legs crossed, picking happily at bicycle spokes – quite absorbed, with the wonders of that new and vivid landscape lying disregarded all about me. Tsi-puff, you might judge this behaviour odd – but if so, I suggest you have never known a human child!

At length I was done. I set myself on the bicycle. I wobbled a bit – for I was on quite a steep slope – but soon I had it steady, and was pushing my way cautiously up the hill. I had to steer to avoid boulders and shrubs, but the ride felt surprisingly easy – as if I, and the bicycle, had become as light as feathers –

and soon I was fair flying towards the crest of the hill.

...But I could see nothing of the land beyond – and it occurred to me, now, that there could be a sharp drop, maybe a cliff, on the other side – and I squeezed at my brakes. But I was travelling far too quickly – the lip of the crest neared, sharp and jagged and bare of vegetation – I could not stop in time, and at the last moment I hauled at my handlebars, heeling the bicycle over on its side. Still I skidded towards that lip –

– and I went flying over it!

The land opened out beneath me. Beyond the scarp was not a cliff after all, I observed with relief, but another shallow slope – I should come down on it in a moment, with little more than a bump...

But I did not land.

I climbed up through the thin, crisp air, and the hillock's crest receded beneath me. There was nothing but air beneath my wheels, as I rose for ten, 20, 30 feet – I could not understand it – and my stomach turned into a tight knot.

At last I reached the peak of my arc, and I turned slowly downwards. The land tipped up towards me, sharp and jagged...

I hit with a clatter – the tyres absorbed some of the impact – I fell sideways and tumbled against the ground, not too hard, and slid down the slope with the bicycle scraping along beside me.

I sat there with the blood pounding in my ears. My jacket elbow was ripped open, and one knee had a long graze, but I was otherwise unharmed. Now that I was down again, my fear instantly receded, to be replaced by the most wonderful exhilaration. I could not understand how I had managed such a spectacular leap – perhaps it was something to do with the richness of the air here, I wondered.

Cursorily, I inspected the wider landscape beyond the Pit. Everywhere, I saw jagged mountains, and boulders, and darker, dusty plains, all liberally coated by a sort of beard of spiky vegetation. There were no houses, no streets, no motor-cars or carriages or trains; I heard no birds sing, no insects call – although here and there the vegetation seemed to be trampled and pulled about, as if grazed by some huge breed of cattle. The horizon was close – nearer than when I had watched boats recede across the sea from Littlestone or Dungeness...

The meaning of all this was clear enough to me. I was at the top of a mountain, I decided. This must be the Himalayas – or the Alps – or somewhere in the Antarctic, perhaps. I was a bright little boy, I think, but my geography was hazy! At any rate I knew that the air grows thinner at altitude, and that there is snow there, even at the height of summer.

So – I must be atop a mountain!

The moon sat on the horizon – but now I did not think it could be *the* moon, for this was a wide, half-shadowed Planet brimming with blue and green and swirling white, and with pinprick lights scattered over its darkened side. Perhaps, I wondered, on top of a mountain it was possible to see stars and other

celestial things invisibly hidden by the air or street-lights at the ground: perhaps this great Planet in the sky was Venus, or Mars.

I was not afraid, Tsi-puff. I knew I was far from home, but I had a child's trust that the adults would eventually find me and restore me to my home – perhaps suitably chastised – and besides, as my father had often explained to me, I was British! – and as such I could turn up wherever I liked, throughout the world, and not be far from a friendly Consul.

I should wait for the Consul, I decided; and that was that...

But I am not being honest in my reporting, for my thinking was not nearly so careful and logical as this account has made it appear. All these reflections and observations rattled through my mind like rain-drops against a roof, disordered, partial and hasty. Truly, my mind was on one thing only: that wonderful flight-ride on my bicycle.

I stood up, brushed off the worst of the dust, and clambered aboard my bicycle once more.

I experimented, learning how to control my leaps and skids. I picked out a kopje coated with purple lichen perhaps fifteen yards from me, and went at it with a will, leaping across the intervening gap; I missed the summit, but scrambled to rest a few feet beneath. Breathless, I hauled myself up to that little peak, kicking aside lichen, and then jumped back to where I had started.

Soon I was flying about those hillocks. If I had been in Clapham I would have ridden over house roofs and church steeples: a boy on his bicycle, whizzing through the air, wheels spinning, and silhouetted against the broad green face of that Planet – it would have been a remarkable image to capture, had anyone been present with a camera...

I remember those first few hours still. Oh, to be a boy again, Tsi-puff, and in such a magical place as this!

I determined to work my way around the circle of peaks about the Pit. I had done perhaps three-quarters of my lap when I first saw the Ant-Men.

I braked my cycle to a halt, and stared, quite open mouthed.

There were six of them, and they stood in a row at the bottom of the Pit. They gazed up at me – utterly silent, like little sculptures. Behind the Ant-Men there was a wide hole in the ground; it opened into a sort of shaft, straight-walled and black, which had previously been hidden from me by the boulders thereabouts.

The nearest Ant-Man took a single, angular step towards me. He was perhaps five feet tall. His legs were so thin they were more like bare bones, I thought, than fleshy limbs. His body seemed segmented, with a fat protuberance near the base, and narrower swellings further up. His head was a sort of pear-shape, with eyes that were as black as currants and set like a fish's on the side of his head. He was quite bald – although tentacles waved from the crown of his skull – and he seemed to me to be wearing a suit of shiny leather.



He had many arms, I registered with astonishment; there was one long, substantial limb, a small pair that patted continually at his face, and a longer pair, sticking out of his mid-section.

He was just like an ant! – blown up to the size of a child, dressed up a bit, and set upright on his hind legs...

A prickle of fear broke through my shock. I had never heard of beings such as these, and I started to wonder if I could really rely on a British Consul being quite as close by as I had hoped.

The Ant-Man turned to his companions. They crowded around each other and conversed in whistles and flutes – their talk drifted up to me like the sound of a steam-calliope. I wondered if I dared hail them. Would they understand English?

Abruptly, the little huddle broke up. Five stepped backwards, their jointed limbs rustling, while the sixth raised up some complicated apparatus that glittered in the flat sunlight. *Ch-uzz!* An arrow, small and sparkling, came whizzing out of the machine and up the hill at me. It fell several yards short, and clanked against the rocks. The Ant-Man raised his weapon a little higher, fiddling with some control...

It was a crossbow, I realized slowly. Far from wishing to help me, these strange insect-fellows were shooting at me.

Ch-uzz – clatter... This one fell not six feet short of me and a little to the right. The marksman's companions hooted encouragement.

I shoved my cycle forward, and pounded at the pedals.

The Bottle, shining in the sun, was about a quarter-mile from me, and I used all my new-found skill at leaping across ravines and between hillocks to get to it. I would be safe inside the Bottle's thick walls, I was convinced, where the arrows of these mountain-men could not penetrate.

The Ant-Men kept up their hooting and whistling, but their voices receded from me.

The air was growing colder, and my breath spouted from my mouth in great puffs of steam. I slipped and scrambled, and vegetation, drying and blackening, smashed to bits as I fell against it.

At last I reached the Bottle. With the logic of a boy, I pushed my cycle in through the open valve – I did not want the Ant-Men to steal it – and then scrambled in myself; I hauled the stopper over, and hastily screwed it into place.

With my breath scraping in my throat, I stared fearfully through the lensed walls, waiting for the visage of an Ant-Man, made still more ferocious by the glass, to come looming over me.

The sunset proceeded apace. The shadows broadened from the base of the hillocks, and a thickening mist pooled around the Pit below. All the vegetation was crumbled and dried-up now, the vivid colours of the day seeping out to be replaced by a dying brown or black. I heard a sound from outside the sphere – the first since the hooting of the Ant-Men – a slow boom... boom... boom... that echoed about the Pit. There was a great scraping, remote and huge, as if

of some greater lid being closed.

I gathered a blanket about me, for I was already shivering hard. The shadow of a hillock seemed to rush across the land towards me – it swallowed the Bottle – and the sun was gone. That Planet – Mars or Venus or whatever it was – still hung over its hill-top, unmoved, as bright and green as before. A snow began to fall, thick and heavy, the flakes as wide as my hand and like complex, six-pointed toys, whirling through the air.

I remembered – belatedly – the heater. I fumbled at the control panel. Rollers snapped open and closed – occasionally the Bottle shuddered, as if wakening from a sleep – but at last I felt a seeping of warmth.

Soon the whole of the Bottle was quite covered over by the snow, and I was suspended in blackness once more.

I was hungry again. But now I remembered, with a sinking heart, that I had finished the last of my three cans before setting off to explore the mountain.

With hunger still gnawing at my belly, I burrowed down into a nest of blankets and was soon asleep.

So ended my first day on the mountain-top.

I have never had a clear idea of how long the days are here. To a boy time is an elastic thing in any event... but I soon got the feeling that the hours here don't flow quite as steadily as they once did in Littlestone, or Clapham.

When I woke the next day, I felt as if I had never had a meal in my life.

The snow was melting, sliding briskly off the glass. The stars were still out – bone-hard and steady – and the land was covered with ice, and with hummocks of a sort of grey snow. It was all drear and dead. But the sunlight was already striding down the hillsides, and where the light touched, great plumes of grey vapour exploded upwards, swirling about and scattering over the land in a dense mist. Soon banks of fog rolled vigorously across the land, sometimes washing over the Bottle and immersing me in brilliance.

I watched this miracle – the rebirth of the world – in a sullen misery.

As soon as it felt warm enough I unscrewed the stopper and dropped out of the Bottle. The cold nipped at my nose and cheeks. Save for a scattering of sticks and the skeletal remnants of leaves, the land was bare, brown and white in the new sunlight. But everywhere there lay pebbles, oval and smooth, which stirred, rustling and cracking in twain like eggs. From each of the pebbles a thin line of green emerged, to probe, with exquisite slowness, at the hard land beneath.

In minutes, it seemed, the whole of that slope was dotted with arrays of little green shoots. How different it all was from our small garden in Clapham, where my father toiled each year to coax his meagre crop of petunias from the clayish ground! Perhaps it would be better if his allotment were at a greater altitude, I thought.

I bent down and dug out a handful of the seedlings. I crammed the little plants into my mouth – they had a faint, bitter taste – and I swallowed them determinedly; but they lay in my stomach with as much nourishment as a handful of grass.

I got onto my cycle and prowled about the burgeoning hillsides, seeking food. All about me leaves and bayonet-spikes thrust forward; and fungus puffs, orange and crimson, swelled like balloons. I experimented with mouthfuls of all of these species, but to no avail.

The air remained fresh and still, and I was immersed in a sort of expectant silence – only my own breath sounded loud in my ears, rattling in the thin air...

Then, all at once, I heard a great bellowing!

I was immensely startled and promptly fell off my bicycle. I scrambled behind an outcropping of rock and peered into the Pit.

I saw a great animal – a huge, snake-like thing, quite limbless – working its way across the Pit floor. The fungi balls, lichen and bayonet plants were already grown so high that they periodically masked my view; but I could see that that immense, plump body was at least two hundred feet long – it was a tube of cold white flesh, with spots of black along the spine. The beast moved by squeezing itself forward in stages, in the manner of a worm, or by rolling over, crushing vegetation and rocks. Its wide mouth worked massively; I saw it bite up a boulder taller than me, suck it clean of vegetation, and then spit out the rock, bare and glistening, as a man may eject a cherry-stone.

Needless to say I had heard of no such Worm-beasts in England, or anywhere in the Empire!

But then I saw one of those Ant-Men following on behind, with stiff, impatient motions of his stick-legs. He wore a spiky helmet, something like a German soldier's; and periodically he would thrust this into some portion of the Worm-beast's anatomy, evoking a great, food-clogged bellow in response.

I fought my hunger and hid behind my rock, waiting for the Ant-Man to pass.

I decided that I should give up my exploring. I would return to the Bottle, and wait for the British Consul to find me. I picked up my bicycle and began to wheel it around my rim of hillocks to the Bottle; I did not care to ride as I had begun to feel dizzy.

As I approached the Bottle I fancied I saw forms moving about it – slim and shadowy, with swift, angular motions. But I could not be sure – the sun was evoking a heat-haze from the rocks and sprawling vegetation, so all was a-quiver.

I laid the bicycle down on the rock, careless now of its safety; I sought nothing but to regain the sanctuary of the sphere. I bent to crawl into the manhole valve –

– and there, on a rock by the valve, sat a bowl. It was made of a yellowish metal, and it contained lumps of some pale substance.

I picked up the largest lump. It was soft in texture, like well-boiled pork, and smelled a little of

mushrooms. I shoved it into my mouth. It was a little soggy, and pretty much tasteless – like a damp biscuit – but it was not unpleasant; and I swallowed it down.

I did not question the provenance of that simple bowlful; I accepted it for what it was – a gift of food – and, clutching it against my chest, I crawled into my Bottle.

There, in the glass-house heat of the day, I finished the food, and slept.

The days went by – the sun rocked across the sky, and the plants shivered through their little lives – and rescue did not come.

I have described the odd elasticity of the hours in this place. I was never sure if the "day" lasted a few hours or – it seemed sometimes – a fortnight! And the days themselves ran together in a sort of rapid blur, like the spokes of a spinning bicycle wheel...

I seemed to be growing inordinately quickly.

My arms were soon poking out of my threadbare blazer, and my trousers dug into my midriff. Before long, it seemed, I was forced to abandon those garments and improvise an outfit from the discards I had found piled into the Bottle. Shoes were more of a problem – once my own started to pinch – but I finally hit on the solution of ripping one of those internal blinds off its roller. There was a metallic paste on the material, but I scraped this off, and employed sharp bits of rock to make myself sandals.

Those bowls of meat, anonymously and discreetly delivered, became my staple diet. I got into the habit of cleaning out my bowl each morning with a little snow-melt, and leaving it some yards from the Bottle; if I left the Bottle for a time by foot or on my cycle, I would invariably find the bowl refilled, and I did not care to inspect too closely for the source.

I developed a way of living of which my mother would not too much have disapproved, I think. I took to rinsing out my underwear and socks in fresh snow-melt each morning, and leaving it to steam dry in the sun. I was careful to wash myself thoroughly, every day. My hair grew out, and I broke some shards from an old bottle and hacked off the worst of it. After some time, I found a bristling, itching sensation spreading over my face. I let this new beard grow until it was long enough to get hold of, and then I chopped it away with my knife of glass.

I soon outgrew my bicycle. I mourned this loss – those great bounds between the hills were a thrill without parallel – but, in any event, the cycle had become battered, damaged and difficult to ride. Carelessly I had left it outside the Bottle one night, being too tired to bring it within, and when I picked it up the next morning, the metal was so cold it stuck to my palms, and the rubber of the tyres had become brittle, so that it crumbled and fell away.

I could not see the moon – I could not understand where it was hiding – and so it was hard to track the passage of the months; but that Planet in the sky went through a regular evolution of its own. It hung motionless in one place, just over the horizon, but the light of the sun tracked its way across its hemi-

spheres; and, further, the Planet turned about on its own axis, within that frame of shadow and light. Thus – unlike the moon, which keeps the same face turned to the earth – the features of that world were wheeled successively into my view.

I knew that Mars was a desert, and so I concluded that this bowl of continents and oceans must be Venus, which is a world of jungles, and the lights sprinkled over its darker side must be its cities. I still could not understand how that remote world could loom so large in the sky, when it was a mere dot of light as seen from Clapham; but this was a minor mystery amid greater puzzles...

Some time after my arrival I noticed a sort of bubble in the Planet's air, like a blister. It was on the equator, just at the line where night meets day. It seemed to me that there was a sort of gushing of the air away from the Planet, out of this blister; for I saw a vague sparkling against the blackness of space. And in the atmosphere, clouds swirled about this huge air-fountain in a tight spiral, agitated and fragmented.

After a time the air blister subsided. The storm dispersed, and ragged streamers of cloud spun off into the air.

That was the first "air puncture" I observed, but certainly not the last. Some of these fountains were extinguished within minutes or hours, but some of them persisted for many days; some punctures even appeared at the bottom of the great oceans, and I could see spectacular water-spouts whipping up towards space, and trailing off in great streams of vapour at the edge of the atmosphere.

Once I glimpsed *something* – a sort of raft of light – which seemed to whiz across the inter-planetary interval between my world and the Planet; it seemed to me a lenticular, complex form, glowing electric blue. It could have been a meteor, I supposed – but my imagination, which remained little advanced beyond the level of a boy's, encouraged me to wonder if it might have been a space-ship, travelling between my world and that Planet.

It was all a fanciful, rather childish speculation – but I saw no harm, Tsi-puff, in lying among the warm rocks in the middle of the day, gazing up at the turbulent face of the Planet, and dreaming dreams of inter-planetary war.

You might think that this solitary life of mine might be dull, and rather lonely. At times, perhaps. But there is something compelling about this mountain-top world of yours, Tsi-puff, with its daily rebirth, its clear and invigorating air, and the extraordinary lightness of everything – including myself! I will admit to certain pangs of wistfulness when I think of my parents; and I have often wished I had some way of signalling to them that I am safe.

When I got too lonely for home, I would turn to the contents of the Bottle. There were a couple of magazines in there – a *Tit-Bits*, and a torn *Lloyd's News* – scraps redolent of England, I suppose, but old even before the Bottle had arrived at Littlestone. I soon turned instead to the collected Shakespeare.

You must understand that I was a reflective little

boy, but hardly well-read when I left Littlestone – I was only ten! – and the Bard's antiquated dialect at first meant little to me. But I stuck at him – and I was fortunate that it was a solidly annotated edition that I had landed up with. (I found also a pocket dictionary in one of the discarded jackets; and this proved of great assistance in developing my vocabulary, and other aspects of my truncated education.)

Slowly, the message of the old boy started to reach me; and the powerful characters embedded in all that prose stepped forward from the shadows of my imagination.

And thus I would sit in the long afternoons, with a cup of snow water in my hand, and that dear book cradled in my lap, while the bayonet-shrubs hurried through their little lives all around me, and the Planet spun like an unfolding dream. Oddly, perhaps, it was the sample of sonnets in that volume which stirred me the most; it was as if the ghostly figure of old William himself were there beside me on my hill-top, whispering to me his exquisite expressions of love, lust, mortality and isolation.

One night the Bottle's heater failed.

I was woken by the gathering cold. I pushed my face out of my blankets – of course there was nothing to see, with the Bottle still buried under its nightly blanket of snow – but I could feel the chill instantly on my nose and lips. I dug out my arm and reached towards the stud controls, but there was a numbness in my hand as soon as it emerged from my nest; and in any event I knew that I could do little but damage by fumbling about with the studs in the dark.

There was nothing for it but to wait it out.

I curled up into as small a ball as possible, and pulled the blankets tight about me. But still the cold worked remorselessly through my covers; I felt as if every last morsel of warmth was being sucked out of my stomach.

At last, I shivered myself into unconsciousness.

I felt little hands upon me – I was being lifted – but I could not resist, nor even open my eyes...

When I came to again, I was on my back – there was a hard, level surface under me – and I seemed to be looking up into some immense, blue-lit cavern. The light came from a liquid – glowing blue – which seeped down the walls and ran along little channels cut there. There was machinery up there in the air, engaged in a sort of complex choreography of flying and spinning pieces of metal that filled the air, without apparent support. I saw Ant-Men. They swooped about the cavern on great, filmy wings; their limbs glowed, cobalt blue. They seemed to be carrying tools, as if intent on tending the aerial machinery. And now I saw still another sort of Ant, who clung to the remote roof of the cavern in a sort of sling. He had a great, distended belly, and periodically the flyers would nuzzle up against their pendant cousin and suckle from his distended gaster...

It all loomed over me, huge and blue-lit, like the elements of a dream.

Now, it seemed to me, a face floated over me. But it was not a human face: it was shaped something like a flattened strawberry, with a down-turned mouth, and a tougher layer of skin, like a cowl, over the scalp and forehead. I saw how hairs, thick and prehensile, wiggled about all over that skin, and how the eyes were a sort of compound structure, made up of cells that were black as berries and each as big as my thumb...

I felt soft tentacles on my body. I wanted to cry out, but I could not; my eyelids would not close, but my vision faded into a sort of generalized blueness, and then – mercifully – I knew nothing.

...I was bathed in a delicious warmth; there was a brilliant light beyond my eyes, which turned the innards of my lids pink.

I opened my eyes. The light was that of the sun, of course; I judged it to be a little after midday, and its warmth seeped deep into me.

I wriggled my fingers and toes, and felt my nose and lips – all those numb extremities had returned to full sensation – but there was an uncomfortable prickliness beneath my back. With a grunt, I sat up – and discovered, to my surprise, that I was as naked as a new-born baby. The prickles had been bits of rock and the spikes of bayonet plants digging into my bare flesh.

I was lying on the hillside, not fifty yards from my Bottle. My clothes were stacked neatly a few feet from me. Close by, too, there was a bowl of meat; I ate quickly, for my hunger was great. It struck me



that the fingers of my hand looked odd – this was the hand which I had thrust into the cold, beyond my blankets – the flesh seemed raw and pink. When I inspected myself more carefully I found similar patches of pink, hairless flesh – neat circles and rectangles – scattered about my chest, arms and legs. There were also a series of small scars, about the size and shape of fingernail clippings, where it looked as if little slices had been taken from my arms and chest. But I felt no pain, or even discomfort.

Still, I was naked, and out of doors! I think I blushed as I pulled my clothes on.

Picking up my bowl, I walked across the hillock to the Bottle. But as I neared, I heard an odd sort of scratching sound – something like the scrape of a fingernail on metal – *and it was coming from within the Bottle.*

With one huge bound I was at the glass – and I could see something inside, a small, obscure shape, tinkering at the stud console. I dropped to my knees and shoved my head and shoulders in through the manhole.

It was an Ant-Man – but a doll of a creature, so small I could have held him in the palm of my hand. His body was segmented and coated in a vivid crimson chitin – quite beautifully made, and so delicate he might have been jewelled. When he saw me come in he spun about and faced me, becoming absolutely motionless. He was standing by the stud panel on a rough pile of empty cans, and he held something like

a screwdriver in his tentacles – and he had got the front cover of that control panel off, and was pulling about at the wires inside!

With a cry I bunched up my fist and brought it swinging down. He did not try to get out of the way, and I caught him square at the junction of head and body. He broke open like a rotten fruit, and a sticky liquid splashed over my hand.

I was so nauseated I had to get my face out of the Bottle; but then I reached back inside, picked up the tins and things over which I had smeared the little corpse, and pulled them out of the Bottle.

I became aware that there was a set of the Ant-Men, all lined up at the bottom of the hillock, peering up at me with their scuttle-shaped faces glinting in the sun. This disturbed me, for they were not accustomed to coming so close; but I yelled a sort of defiance, and I hurled the mess away, over the plain beyond the Pit. The tins twisted in the air, falling with unseemly slowness, before at last crashing to the ground.

I had no idea what the little Ant-thing had intended, but I knew I would have to try to fix the panel, for otherwise I should freeze once more. I picked up the front casing, and scooped up the wires and things inside it, and tried to shove the whole lot back together by main force...

From beyond the glass walls there was a rustle of chitinous limbs.

I clambered hastily out of the Bottle.

Here was yet another diminutive Ant-Man – his crimson coat sparkling in the sun – as smart as a toy soldier. He had a sort of belt about his waist, with several tools tucked in it; and his blackcurrant eyes were fixed on me suspiciously.

"Clear off!" I shouted, and I picked up a rock that lay nearby.

The toy Ant-Man did not move. I shouted at him again, and chucked the rock. It went sailing over his head before smashing to bits against the ground; but the little chap got the message right enough, for, with a sort of piccolo toot, he spun about and made off down the hillside.

And so we whiled away a good part of that afternoon, with a succession of the tiny Ant-mechanics sidling up the hill, and me squatting at the top, cheerfully throwing rocks. I had the impression that the Ant-Men could not see me so well if I stayed still – their complex eyes seemed better at detecting motion – and I evolved a strategy of letting the mechanics almost stumble upon me, before erupting from my stasis and sending them scuttling.

And all the time the sun, bright and huge, sank down towards the horizon, and the bayonet-plants and trumpet-blossoms withered all about me.

At last, there was a general conference among the larger Ant-Men, with much hooting and whistling. Then two of them broke away from the pack, and came toiling up the hill towards me.

I stood up. I was confident of being able to defend myself – for that little creature had squashed more easily than a bug – but I had no wish to start a gen-

eral war.

The two Ant-Men finished up perhaps ten yards down the slope from me. They were both the usual five feet tall – rather shorter than I was, now – but quite different in design. One of them had a head shaped like an upside-down pear, so that his face was drawn long, almost comically, and his brain-case bulged. There was a ridge of grey-white spines running along the crest of his head, and a larger ridge curved over the eyes on each side. The brain of the other was still more distended – he wore a thin cap covering his skull, within which I could see a slow pulsation – and it was as if the rest of his body had been drawn up and devoured by that extraordinary head, for it was quite thin, delicate and atrophied, even by comparison with the other Ant-Men. He looked, in fact, rather like a small boy carrying some huge football on his shoulders.

They stood there, gazing up at me. If they were radiating fear – or contempt, or hatred, or boredom – in their angular, silent stances, I could not tell.

At last I called: "I would be grateful if you kept those little fellows under control. They are making a proper mess of my Bottle, and I'll not have it!"

The larger-brained of the pair turned to his companion, his head swivelling as smoothly as a bit of machinery, and he hooted briefly. Then he spoke to me – his voice was a flat sort of piping – but his language was quite recognizable English. "M'm – M'm – you – if I may say – *danger*. In danger. The night. M'm – M'm – must let repair."

I considered this. "What do you call yourselves?"

"He – Tsi-puff. I – Phi-oo."

(And so it was – it was you, Tsi-puff!)

I introduced myself in my turn, as "Mister Thomas Simmons".

"M'm – if I may say – you must let little fellows help."

"Well, that's as may be," I said stiffly. "But I would much rather you simply direct me to the nearest British Consul."

Given that his face was an expressionless mask of chitin, this made Phi-oo look confused.

I turned to the silent companion, who regarded me steadily. "Can't he say a word for himself?"

"Not speak – listen. Remember – if you understand. M'm – M'm – Tsi-puff loves to remember. None better at remember. M'm – M'm – *Danger*," he said. "The night – the sun –"

I stared at Phi-oo doubtfully. The sun was dipping closer to the horizon, and I felt a fine cold gathering about my face.

"These little chaps of yours – they *are* trying to help me, I suppose – not smash things up?"

"They like to repair – little fellows, also known as chaps. No other thing. M'm – M'm – if you understand – they like *you*. New thing to repair. Eh?"

I sat on the rocks, and vegetation crumbled under me. "Well. Alright. I don't think I have a choice..."

"Wise – M'm – if I may say." Phi-oo turned and hooted down the slope to his fellows; his thin voice echoed from the rocks of the Pit.

Soon two little mechanics were scrambling to the

top of the hillock, their tiny devices clanking on their belts. They skirted me by a good ten feet. Then they scampered into the Bottle, their penny-whistle voices piping.

I turned back to Phi-oo. "I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have killed that other one."

"M'm – M'm – he warned us. Of the cold. M'm – we were prepared. Not easy – if I may say – mooneys hate cold too – and so forth. We watched you. He advised us – M'm – how to repair. Broken flesh – cells smashed open – if you understand. M'm –"

"He advised you? *Who?*"

"Cavor. M'm – he –"

Cavor: it was the first time I had heard that name. "Cavor? Who is that? Is that an English name?"

Phi-oo's brain pan pulsed. "*Man*. M'm – not mooney. En-glish?"

The mechanics came tumbling out of the valve, rattling to the ground like two dolls; and they scuttled back into the Pit.

Phi-oo and Tsi-puff turned, and prepared to make their way down the slope; in the distance I heard that daily booming, emanating from the open shaft in the ground.

"Thank you," I called. "I should like to meet this – Mr Cavor. Is that possible? I have some Shakespeare. I could read it to him, if he likes..."

Phi-oo halted. "Where – M'm – where are you? Do you know – if you understand? Where?"

I frowned. "On a mountain – that's clear enough. Is it the Himalayas?"

For answer, Phi-oo turned to his companion and piped briefly, and the two of them set off once more down the slope.

"Wait! Can you at least tell me what country this is? Is it Tibet?"

But the Ant-Men were hurrying off across the plain of the Pit, fleeing the lengthening shadows, and I was left alone.

After that, my solitude seemed a little harder to bear. I began to look out for any parties of Ant-Men who might come my way, and in particular for that large-brained individual called Phi-oo, who had provided me with my first fragments of conversation since the day I had climbed into the Bottle.

My hopes of a new encounter with Phi-oo were – at first – dashed. But I was not without company, for Phi-oo's taciturn partner – the smaller-brained fellow, the memory man (*you*, Tsi-puff, the hero of the story again) – one day came trudging up the hillside.

I had been re-reading a passage of *Hamlet*; I closed the book up when he approached. "Hullo," I said. "Are you looking for me?"

Tsi-puff said nothing. His huge, segmented eyes were fixed on me, and his expressionless mouth hung open at the base of his complex skull.

I returned to my reading, and so he remained – for long minutes afterwards.

At last I confronted him. "Look here, are you simply going to observe me? Because if you are, you're being a bit impolite about it. Why couldn't you have brought your friend Phi-oo, so that we could have

discussed it all?"

Of course he did not reply.

I admit I found this silent attention disturbing. I took a short walk around the Pit's rim; and Tsi-puff tracked me like some ungainly shadow. I sheltered inside my Bottle for a time, and Tsi-puff peered in, his inhuman face distorted –

And so on!

As the evening drew on, Tsi-puff scuttled away, to the safety of the underground caverns; but he reappeared the next day – and the next. Sometimes his spindly presence would irritate me so much that I would shout at him, or wave my arms, to drive him off. Once I even chucked a rock at him (I apologize again, Tsi-puff!).

But I slowly grew to accept his mute company. And as for his own purpose – I supposed these Ant-Men of Tibet had not seen very many Englishmen before, and perhaps Tsi-puff was here to study the language.

One day I was reading my Shakespeare, and Tsi-puff was standing idly by, as silent as a tree in that sunlit landscape. "Tsi-puff," I said, "as long as you're going to stand about here – why don't I read you some of this stuff? It's rather good – this man knew a little, you know, in an irregular sort of way. And if you're so good at remembering as Phi-oo claimed, you'll have no trouble memorizing the lines – eh?"

He did not react – he never did.

I returned to my place in the text and began to read: "How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank! Here we will sit, and let the sounds of music creep in our ears..."

And so on.

At first I picked passages at random – whatever I was dipping into at the time, or else my favourite pieces. But then, one day, I turned to the front of the volume, and began again: this time reading through the first play in the book, from Act One, Scene One; and on, systematically. At the rate of a few pages a day, I knew it would take me a long time to complete the volume – and yet, the more I pursued it, the more important the project seemed to me. My purpose, only half-admitted to myself, I think, was to ensure the transcription of Shakespeare's immortal words into Tsi-puff's capacious memory, before the pages of my volume fell apart from over-use.

Such a project might strike you as odd, for a young man still ostensibly waiting for the British Consul to arrive, and take him home. But I think a deeper understanding of my plight was unfolding, somewhere deep in my head... an understanding expressing itself only by this rather feeble attempt to impress something of myself and my people into the souls of these Ant-Men.

I was reading my Shakespeare – I think it was *King Lear* – when I next encountered Phi-oo.

I had just broken off, for I had become aware in a change of the quality of the light. I put the book down and shaded my eyes.

The change came from the Planet, fat and blue, which today was afflicted by a veritable plague of

puncture-fountains. Air and water erupted everywhere. The great carcass of atmosphere was not withstanding this punishment too well; the clouds swirling about the punctures seemed thinner than before, while I could see a brownish fringe at the edge of the seas, as if a substantial part of the waters were being lost, and new lands exposed.

A shadow fell across me; I turned, a little startled. It was Phi-oo, his distended brain pulsing.

"Oh! You surprised me."

He regarded me gravely. "M'm – M'm – if I may say it – *you come*."

"What?" Although I had long hoped to converse with Phi-oo again – this was only the second time I had met him, after all – I was still distracted by that spectacular show in the sky.

"Come," Phi-oo said again. "Cavor..."

Now he had my full attention. I stood up. "Cavor? The Englishman? What of him?"

"He – M'm – loves to see you. No – *likes* to see you. Meet you – if you understand. M'm..."

"But why? Why now?"

"*Dying*. If you understand. M'm – he – would love – like – see you – *dying*. You come," he said.

And without ceremony, he and Tsi-puff turned on their heels, as well synchronized as if they had rehearsed it, and set off with insectile grace down the slope.

After several deep breaths – and much indecisive fist-clenching – I followed, leaping down the hillside with great bounds.

I was surrounded, quite closely, by a little group of Ant-Men. There were six of them, including Phi-oo and Tsi-puff. I noted that the other four wore ferocious-looking helmets, all spikes, and each carried a crossbow; I took care not to seem threatening – it was not easy, for I quite towered over those fierce little warriors – and we made our way across the boulder-strewn floor of the Pit (it was my first visit there).

We came past a herd of Worm-beasts, which rolled and gulped their way across the land. Close to, their flanks were walls of crumpled, dirty leather, and – when one opened his mouth to bellow – I got a blast of warm air, as foul-smelling as a butcher's slab.

At last we reached that great, open shaft in the ground. I saw little trails of lights which snaked around its black walls, a pattern which dwindled to nothing in the far distance – it was like looking into a smoke-blackened cone. With some words from Phi-oo – and a few prods from the guards – I was encouraged to climb down, through a sort of hatch, and onto a curving ramp. This ramp, I soon gathered, wound in a sort of spiral around the circumference of the cylindrical shaft.

We began to trudge steadily downwards. Soon I was out of sight of the daylight – and I had to suppress a panic.

It seemed to me that if we were to walk all the way we should never reach the bottom; but then a sort of platform, a great disc almost as wide as the shaft itself, came spinning up from the darkness.

The disc was of a dark metal – it might have been gold – and it carried several Ant-Men, dressed in a variety of garbs. The disc passed above us, and I was able to see that *there was nothing supporting the platform!* – it was rising on the air as lightly as a bird.

The platform dipped again, and came to rest alongside our shelf. There was a gap of a foot or so, and – encouraged by further sharp prods – I was made to step across (my heart was in my mouth, at the thought of the drop beneath).

The whole of my party was soon on the platform, and it began a rapid descent. The platform swayed slightly, and I found myself unable to forget its lack of support below.

There was a diffuse blue glow, which came from a liquid, glowing brightly, which ran in channels scored into the walls of the shaft. And far below, at the base of the shaft – so I saw, when I dared venture close to the disc's edge – there was a sort of sea, also glowing blue.

Many corridors had been cut away from this main vertical shaft, and I caught glimpses of great caverns and rooms beyond. Hereabouts, I thought, the countryside was no more solid than a sponge, or a bit of Swiss cheese.

Phi-oo stood close to me. "Once – M'm – we used balloons – Cavor called them, if I may say – *balloons*. And parachutes – like umbrellas. Clumsy – unstable." He tapped at the platform with his foot; chitin clattered against metal. "Much better now – if you understand. *Cavorite* – M'm!"

There were perhaps a score of Ant-Men on the disc, apart from those in our party, and they all stared unashamedly at me. There were not two alike, I thought! Some had brain-cases almost as large as Phi-oo's; one chap had a claw-like hand as big as a briefcase; another sported eyes as big as footballs, protected by boxes of blue-tinted glass – and so on. All the time, as we descended, I heard a soft rustling all about me, as of chitinous limbs moving over each other; and there was a soft hooting as they conversed.

We slid down past one cavern where, instead of the general blueness of things, there was a yellowish glow, from source I could not identify; and – sitting on the ledge of the central shaft, his legs dangling over that great drop – *I saw a boy*: – a human boy – not one of these Tibetans! He was lean and quite naked. He looked at me without curiosity, from under a thatch of thick black hair.

I made for the edge of my disc and waved, shouting hullo. The boy looked down at me, as impassively as an Ant-Man; and in a moment he was lost to my sight.

I pressed Phi-oo. "Who was that boy? Where are his people? What are they doing here?"

"M'm – *experiment* – if I may say – yes. Experiment – idea by Cavor – you understand. M'm – snips of flesh – no pain..." He pointed at my upper arms, where I still bore the tiny, enigmatic crescent-shaped scars I had suffered in that night I had almost frozen. "Your people? If I may say – brothers

— sons — of *you*.” He poked my chest, as if pleased with himself, and would say no more.

At length — long before we reached the base of the shaft — the disc drew to a stop alongside one of those transverse tunnels, and I was encouraged, with a few sly prods, to step off the platform. We walked down a corridor, away from the shaft, and I noticed how, in this greater darkness, even the chitin of the Ant-Men themselves emitted that ubiquitous pale blue light.

At length we came to a door — it had no handle, and simply pushed open — and we walked into a room.

The chamber was perhaps twenty feet across. There was a single piece of furniture here — a simple bed — and the room was a rough cylinder, six-sided. The light was a mixture of blue and yellow, a little like that I had seen in that chamber with the child, somewhere above us.

And on the bed —

I will not describe my reaction at what I saw there.

It was a man — or, at any rate, it had *once* been. He lay on the bed. He was dressed mostly in a blanket, with his head thrust through a rough hole cut in it; he wore a flannel jacket and knickerbockers, and he had a beard over his mouth, almost as coarsely shaved as my own. Straggles of spiky, greying hair clung to his scalp, and a dirty cricket cap lay beside him on the bed. He had a squat, flabby torso; he could never have been tall. His eyes were ruddy brown — wide, staring and, it seemed to me, tinged with a little madness...

And that was all! His sleeves and leggings had been tied neatly over — *for he was without limbs*.

I thought I could face it, but I was almost unmanned again.

“Don’t be afraid, boy,” he said, and his voice was weak, but not threatening. “Come here. I know I present a pretty horrific sight — I should have run a mile, when I was your age! — but I’ll not hurt you.”

I stood by the bed, for there was no chair; and my hands twisted together. “Mr Cavor, is it?”

“That’s me,” he whispered. “The first man in the moon — but not the last — eh!”

I scarcely knew how to respond to this mad remark.

“Well. And so you are Mister Thomas Simmons.”

I told him I was, and how I had got here. “I did not mean any harm,” I told Cavor; yet I felt a little ashamed, for what seemed to me the words of a ten-year-old coming from the mouth of a man.

He gave a sort of chuckle — a ghastly thing, that shook his helpless bulk. “You were lucky... I suppose the sphere’s carbonic acid extractors, and the like, have kept functioning... and your random opening and closing of the blinds seems to have been sufficient to have brought you down safely. I suppose you could have journeyed back — the sphere still works — I could have advised you...” His carcase twitched towards me, like a beached whale’s. “But you are better off here, boy — better off here! They think of you as a sort of wild animal, you know — as danger-



ous and fascinating as a lion, but just as harmless *in captivity*... That's why they've preserved you – you see?...

"It was the Selenites, of course –"

I could not follow him. "Who?"

He nodded his head, weakly, towards the Ant-Men. "It's a sort of punishment – I suppose – a relic of their evolutionary past. They caught me with my lash-up of some electrical bits and pieces, you see – after I was stranded here, when the sphere departed – I was trying to signal the earth –" He looked at me with a desperate hope in his watery eyes. "You don't know if I succeeded, do you? If I got through?"

I couldn't answer him. I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Well. No matter... Trying, though, was worth the candle! But they found me – and fell on me in the dark – I remember those multiple, soft hands..."

"They used a specialist Selenite, with a great claw like a lobster's, to snip off my arms and legs, as neatly as you'd like; and another specialist to cauterize the wounds; and a third who licked the severed parts before the cutting. I *felt* it all – but no pain... some anaesthetic in the saliva, I suppose..."

He sighed. "And so Bedford made it back in one piece – presumably by your combination of random prodding and good fortune, for he was the most incapable man I ever...! And he managed to lose the sphere within hours of landing – the only Cavorite in the world!" He cackled. "So much for his plans of wealth... of Cavorite-clad shipping, and building, and locomotion; of his webs of companies and trusts and privileges and concessions; of his armed miners returning here for the gold in the rocks... all gone! – like the dream it was. Well – but I imagine he managed to land on his feet – chaps like that always do, in my experience. I wonder if he ever finished that wretched play of his..."

"The wasp does it, you know," he said. "The digger, at any rate..."

I was baffled by this. "What?"

"Captures its prey live – and paralyses it, and bites off its legs – to provide a source of food for the larvae – a source which does not decay..."

"Of course I am not meant as food for these Selenites – thank God for some mercies! – but one can see a sort of pattern... After all the mooncalves are quite limbless." I gathered he was talking about the Worm-beasts. "But there, evidently, you have the result of millennia of directed evolution, on the part of the Selenites... No need for all that busy *snipping*, eh, when your food-beast is born without legs in the first place!..."

And so he went on, his monologue rambling, discontinuous and complex, and much of it quite passing me by – and yet I stood at his bed-side for long hours, as motionless as any Ant-Man. I was quite spell-bound by the first human voice other than my own that I had heard in years, and by the extraordinary story he had to tell me: of how he had built his sphere – my Bottle – *and travelled with it beyond the earth* – and, at last, by his still more remarkable speculations...

"I was mad," Cavor said. "Mad to tell the Grand Lunar of us – of Man – and *war*... These Selenites have conquered their bit of nature, here – this world is civilized to its core – sterile and too ordered in human eyes, perhaps, but they are not men! – and it is too much to expect that they would allow surface-dwelling, arrogant, violent monkeys like *us* to disrupt all that..."

"It was the invention of Cavorite," he wheezed. "That was all... the rest of it is inevitable, really: the clash of incompatible species, the dismantling of planets – it all flowed from that! At first I thought the Selenites could not manufacture Cavorite, for there is no *helium* here – helium is a key component in the manufacture of... *but one may manufacture helium itself*!" His laugh had been bitter. "Or at least the Selenites can. How could I have known? One bangs together hydrogen atoms, it seems, until..."

"I had hoped that these Selenites would try for no more than a benevolent conquest," he whispered. "I thought that the more sensible sort of man might cooperate with the Selenites, when he saw the inevitability of defeat. Besides – I hoped! – there might be something in us that they valued, despite our savagery – naive fool that I am, as Bedford so often remarked. For they want *nothing* of us! They have no time for us – for our art, our literature – none of it! Nothing that is ours – *except*... our planet itself, and its core of iron."

"What a weapon Cavorite is! I had never conceived it as such but no doubt Bedford did, in some private fantasy. Still, I should have known... after all I came close to stripping away the earth's atmosphere myself, on the first manufacture of Cavorite... when those fools Gibbs and Spargus let the furnace cool too quickly... I should have known!"

"Perhaps it is kinder that the Selenites finish us off," he railed, "for – with such a tool as Cavorite – we should surely have done it to ourselves before long!"

After some hours of this, Cavor was clearly weakening, and Phi-oo motioned that I should come away.

I was brought back to the surface, in a turmoil.

The next day I hurried to the side of the hillock, hoping that I might be brought down to Cavor again, but Phi-oo did not come; the Worm-beast hinds raised their goads at me suspiciously.

With difficulty, I returned to my reading of Shakespeare, and my old life. But now it all seemed shallow – empty, purposeless – a side-show, on the stage of a great theatre of events. I sat in my Bottle and tried to imagine how it must have felt for those two unlikely explorers – Bedford and Cavor – as they had looked out through bent glass at that magical, first dawn...

Some months after my descent into the caverns of the Ant-Men, as I walked around the Pit's rim, I saw a little group of children – naked, lean, and tall but *as human as me* – standing around in some bewilderment on the floor of the Pit, at the mouth of that great shaft in the ground. A group of specialized Ant-Men – robust, squat creatures – supervised

them, hooting and brandishing goads. The children looked odd – so tall and fine-boned that they appeared stretched, and with something of a look of the Ant-Man about them – but they seemed well-suited for this place; and they were soon leaping like gazelles about the Pit, hooting to each other in odd echoes of the Ant-Men's speech.

I did not approach them – I had no wish to scare them – but it was not long before they discovered me, for my glinting Bottle is quite a prominent landmark in the sunlight, and they came clambering up, in ones and twos, to see me. They speak a pidgin of simple English mixed in with an Ant-Man piping I cannot understand. I could make them laugh by capering about, and showing them the Bottle, and doing silly tricks with handkerchief-rabbits and the like – but I was an alien to them, I think, no less exotic than the Ant-Men who manufactured their births.

They were children indeed; but – even now, when I look into their huge, empty eyes – I have never been sure if they are fully *human*.

Meanwhile – above all our heads – the Planet continued its evolution. Soon the fountains had quite stripped away the atmosphere and oceans; the Planet became a brown ball, still crowned by a little ice at the poles, and surrounded by a hazy cloud of ice particles and bits of frozen air. I could not see how life could persist, on that naked globe. But sometimes I saw clusters of lights – little islands of them – moving about over that bare surface; and sometimes they gathered in colonies that shone brilliantly. And I saw new fountains – they looked like tongues of dirty rock – which widened into glowing volcano-mouths, like open, glowing wounds in the hide of a world – and I remembered what Cavor had said of the dismantling of worlds.



At last, one day, Phi-oo came clambering up from the pit. He informed me that Cavor was dead.

The medical science of this place is greatly advanced over that of Clapham – but at last, Cavor's degeneration was so great, and the Ant-Men's ignorance of the human condition so overwhelming, that his life could not be sustained. Cavor's own diagnosis – so I was told by Phi-oo – was that he was a vegetarian, who had never grown accustomed to the meat he was served up here...

I received this news in silence.

So it was over – and I had met him only the once – and yet his vision of things, I knew, had moulded my unformed mind, for the rest of my life.

Soon it will be my own turn to die.

I have accepted that, and I have told Phi-oo that I want to finish it all out here, under the stars – I've

no desire to finish up as did poor Cavor, on a lonely pallet in an Ant-Men's warren.

I do not know how the years have slipped away from me, Tsi-puff. Time is liquid here... Perhaps time is different, on a smaller world...

Oh, yes – another world! I know now I am on no mountain-top – and that the Planet in the sky is not Venus, or Mars... that you, Tsi-puff, are no Tibetan, and that it is most unlikely that I will ever see a British Consul here.

The Ant-Men's work on the Planet above is almost done – at least I have lived to see that spectacle. Those volcano-mouth wounds spread across the exposed surface like a cancer, and merged... The

Ant-Men's Cavorite engines, plunging deep into immense mines, have lifted off the crust of the world – and they have stripped away the mantle of glowing rock and iron beneath, down to a depth of hundreds of miles. What is left is about half the diameter of the original globe – like a star, glowing red, surrounded by a dispersing cloud of cooling rock and air-crystals. It is an Iron Core, turned by pressure into a new form: a single crystal, four thousand miles across!

...It is magnificent – a jewel for the Ant-Men, a prize for which they have taken apart a world. But – what of Man?

Cavor had devised a plan, he told me in a whisper, at the end of that single, momentous visit.

"As soon as I knew the Selenites had Cavorite, I knew that Man was done for on earth. Oh, there must have been fighting – perhaps pockets survived for a time, at the bottom of mines... But it was not *viable*. Do you see? Only here – *here* can men find a place.

"These New Men... these expanded cells of yours... these New Simmonses! Eh? I intrigued the Selenites..." He had looked sly, and he even winked at me. "You see? I offered them a new breed... a new sort of worker... *A tame man*.

"So they made 'em. Dozens and dozens of Simmonses! But they won't be able to raise them as specialists as they can their own kind... Our form is not nearly so plastic, and can't be moulded... And besides, men are intrinsically more stupid than your brightest Selenite, because of the rigidity of the brain-case... Well. But still! – we can employ a certain *cunning*. Eh?"

He imagined men of the future escaping from the nest-cities of the Ant-Men, and making off into the remote caverns of the Central Sea... "To places hidden even from the Grand Lunar," wheezed Cavor, "places where the Tzee hunts, and the Rapha spreads its immense tentacles... places where men may breed, and grow stronger – living like big, sav-

age rats, with earth-bred muscles – and at last they will face down the Selenites, for the mastery of *this* world. Well. What do you think... eh?"

And he had fixed me with his watery brown eyes – this limbless man, plotting the survival of humanity from his solitary bed.

Cavor said the Ant-Men plan to turn the whole of that great Iron Core into a ship of Cavorite – and with it, to explore the planets, and stars, and star-systems beyond. They will turn all of space, I suppose, into some extension of this world of theirs... it will be ordered, and specialized, with a single immense Mind directing it all – and they will reach for a better evolution than Man could ever have attained.

Perhaps such a magnificent goal for *life* – said Cavor – even if not *human* life – was a worthy bargain, for the destruction of Man's only world! His intellect was unsympathetic, at times.

I could not say.

As for his "tame men" – the New Simmonses – I have looked into their eyes, and I have seen nothing of earth there. Whatever the future holds for Man and Ant-Man, it will be as none of us – not even Cavor – have dreamt so far!

But futurity is for others, Tsi-puff. As for me, my story is done. Now that I have committed the entire contents of my Shakespeare to your capacious memory – and so have done my imperfect best to preserve the last and best of human culture – what else have I to do, but lie here among the bayonet-shrubs and dream away the long afternoons?

The evening grows cold, and the booming of the subterranean machines is echoing about the Pit. The Iron Core throws long crimson shadows across the dying bayonet plants...

Perhaps I shall stay here, Tsi-puff, and watch the stars come out.



Stephen Baxter's latest novel, *The Time Ships*, is reviewed in this issue of *Interzone*. His last story in these pages was "Brigantia's Angels" (IZ 91), and his work also appears fairly frequently in *Asimov's SF Magazine*. He lives in Buckinghamshire.

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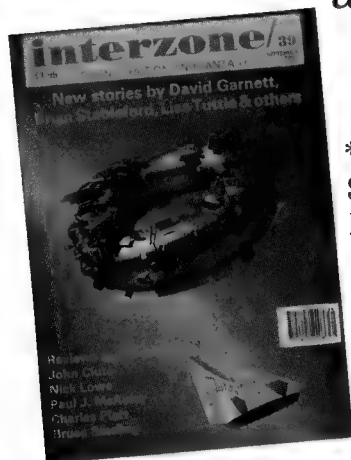
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“As you can tell, I am a perfect replica of a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, but in fact I’m a white Lithuanian atheist and that has caused me no end of adventure and fun. The latest bit was the United States immigration and naturalization service first taking unbelievably long with my re-entry permit and then making it out to show that I am a German citizen, which I am not. I was born on a diplomatic passport, so I am a citizen of the country which issued the passport: Lithuania.”

Algis Budrys, writer, editor and critic, born in 1931, is known to friends and colleagues as “A.J.” He and I had never met, but were due to chat at a science-fiction convention in Winchester, England. In the end, because of Mr Budrys’s little contretemps with officialdom mentioned above, we met in the quiet stillness of my study – he answering my questions through a tape prepared a week before and thousands of miles away, in Evanston, Illinois, and I listening as his soft voice cut through the whirring of my cassette deck.

“I’ve been in the States since 1936. My father was the consul-general for Lithuania, first in Königsberg, Germany – where I was born – then he transferred to Manhattan, and I have been here in the USA ever since. I was, of course, much charmed by Lithuania breaking away from the Soviet Union. I never thought I would

see the day, and for a while all was well under the Landbergis regime which lasted about six months, but now the communists have taken over – the Lithuanian communists – and, well... I can’t go back. My uncle and aunt, who are world-class sculptors and designers, have gone back. My uncle has moved most of his sculptures into the Vilnius Museum. Numerous of my relatives have gone back for brief periods. They come back pretty depressed. I can’t go back – I think I would get in serious trouble if I did – but that’s all right because I don’t want to go back.”

Algis Budrys’ most recent novel is *Hard Landing*. It came out in America in 1993, but has still to find a publisher in Britain.

“*Hard Landing* is about the deal an ambitious congressman makes with the captain of a flying saucer. It goes on up through the years and, by odd coincidence, it ends the day that Nixon resigns the Presidency of the United States. It’s a short novel. Probably it isn’t being snapped up by British publishers because of the American story-line, more than usual for an sf novel, but it got nominated for a Nebula which means it was one of the five best novels of 1993. I’m pretty pleased with it.”

I put it to him that a notable feature of the Budrys oeuvre is how few novels he has written over a long career.

I write and I write good – and that’s the way of it

Algis Budrys

talks to

Sally Ann Melia



"Well, it's not quite that bad – though your point is well taken. First I wrote *False Night* in 1953, but it ran into publishing problems. Lion Library decided to cut *False Night* by a quarter in type, in a matter of hours. You can't cut a novel by 25 percent – especially not in type! – and have it come out sounding like anything. So... I went around with a wound in my chest for several years. Then I wrote *Who?*, which Lion Library bought and liked very much, but it wound up sitting in a safe for many years because Lion Library went belly-up, and Pyramid finally brought it out. *Who?* is my second novel, but it looks like my third because in the meanwhile *Man of Earth* appeared. *Man of Earth* was a terrible book; 99% of the faults for it being a terrible book are mine and I won't permit another American edition, so it is therefore sinking gracefully into obscurity and the less said about that book the better. Then *Who?* came out and it did well. Then I wrote *The Falling Torch*, which was a pretty good novel. I took so long to write *The Falling Torch* and there was so much pressure on me to finish it that I didn't write the next-to-last chapter. I went directly from the hero saying 'I know how to solve the problem' to a chapter where he has obviously solved it. That didn't seem to bother anybody. The book went through eight printings. It sold a lot of copies. I finally wrote the chapter – mainly for my own amusement, because nobody had missed it – and that came out fairly recently, in 1991, to absolutely no acclaim whatsoever.

"I'm proud of every one of my novels except *Man of Earth*. How do I see them? I see them as novels. Your implication that I could have written a lot of other novels which would presumably have been mediocre, but would be all right – I don't see it. Why should I write a bunch of books which would only add to the bunch of books that are published every year? It is not that I wait until an idea strikes me as being unusually good: if I get an idea for a novel I write it. The same thing with short stories. I've written some dogs, but by and large my short stories have been good and they are getting better. Some bad, some good. I'm a pretty good writer. I am in fact, although the general public does not realize this, one of the best science-fiction writers. What can I say? I write and I write good, and that's the way of it. I've done an enormous number of other things. I have pretty much always pursued an editorial career. When I wasn't doing that I was in public relations and advertising, and those things take up

a certain amount of time. When I was in public relations – a fairly long period of time – I didn't write any fiction, none at all. When I was in editorial work I wrote a fair amount of editorial copy and a fair number of articles in all kinds of fields. I didn't write any fiction. But I think my career has been pretty satisfactory."

I asked Algis Budrys to discuss some of his later novels, starting with the highly-praised *Rogue Moon* (1960).

"Matter transmission is an old, old idea in science fiction. It predates me by at least a generation, and there are two kinds of matter transmission



roughly. One consists of broadcasting a signal which carries an object or a human being to a receiver where it is reconstituted: that strikes me as being pretty darn impossible. The idea of a machine tearing a person down and sending the resulting information to a receiver where a person is reconstituted from any convenient supply of atoms strikes me as likelier. Now, mind you, *Rogue Moon* was written around the scene by the swimming pool. I had written that years earlier. I had no idea what it was about, and one day I was talking to John R. Pierce on the phone (at the time he was the head of Bell Laboratories). I was writing a short series of science articles for various magazines, and I brought up the idea of matter transmission and he poo-pooed it. He explained you would have to have infinite bandwidth in the signal broadcast, which of course you don't have and so forth, and I agree. As I was talking to him, the entire idea for *Rogue Moon* came to me. I hung up the phone and

ran home to my typewriter and wrote a 50-page single-space outline. Practically every detail in the book is in that outline. I've never done that since. I didn't do it before, but I knew I would begin to lose some of the subtleties of the novel if I tried to keep it all in my head. Indeed that happened. I wrote *Rogue Moon* over a period of three years. At times I was just plodding blindly ahead on the outline because I had forgotten parts of it, but it came out all right.

"The editor was Knox Burger – he had been the fiction editor of *Collier's* magazine and went on to be a pretty well-known literary agent – he didn't know sf, didn't like sf, so he thought for instance that my title for the novel, which was 'The Death Machine,' wasn't science-fiction enough. So I kept suggesting title after title and he kept rejecting them, and I didn't know until the book came out that it was going to be called *Rogue Moon*. To this day I don't know what 'Rogue Moon' means. It certainly doesn't have anything to do with the book, but it is *Rogue Moon* and it will probably continue to be *Rogue Moon* till the day I die or longer.

"Anyhow... All kinds of nice things happened. I came to the scene set in the machine (on the moon) and I had no idea what I was going to write; I just typed five pages as rapidly as I could type, and there it was. I arrived at the last line: 'No, I'm not going to fall for that. Some day I or someone like me will hold you in his hand.' That had been the last line from the minute I had got the idea. I

came to that line and I kept right on typing, and much to my amazement I wrote another final chapter. I wrote the new last line and I think it is awfully good. I am very happy with the book. Knox Burger, for all his faults, did not mess with it. The book is exactly as I wrote it. Exactly. I'm just plain delighted.

"All right, on to *Michaelmas* [1977]. I had quit a job as the editor-in-chief of Playboy Press. I cleared a space in my cellar and I bought a new typing table and chair and an old-model electric typewriter. It was the first fully electric typewriter I had ever owned – because my right shoulder had finally packed up. Up until then I typed with one finger; I had been typing with one finger since I was eleven or so, on this typewriter that I had gotten from my father's office. By the time I got to where I was writing professionally, I was blindingly fast – people came from miles away to watch me type. But then my shoulder packed up and I had to do something. So I brought this electric portable, and a book called *Typing Made Simple* for \$1.98. In two weeks, I had

gotten to the point that when I directed a finger to the keyboard out came the letter that I wanted, which was as much as I needed. So to this day I cannot touch-type, but I do now use all ten fingers. Anyway, I got this IBM model, a beat-up old wreck of a typewriter, and I wanted to test the action of it. So I put a piece of paper in it and I found myself typing the word, 'Michaelmas'. I thought: 'That was all right' – because it was just to test the typewriter. I fed in another piece of paper and I wrote: 'Chapter One,' and I wrote a sentence and another sentence and another sentence... and three days later I was at the point where Horace Watson's helicopter crashes and Michaelmas steps out into the hotel lobby.

"I had no inkling that I had that novel in me. Once I started, everything fell into place. The novel as it was originally published contains exactly that text. Not a word has been changed. I spent three days in the cellar. I didn't dare go upstairs; I pissed in the laundry tub. Edna, my wife, brought me coffee; and I just – bang! flat out! – wrote the novel... well, the first part of it. I added a two- or three-page outline and sent it around – this was in 1965 – and nobody brought it. Nobody wanted it. In 1965, mind you! Well ahead of the Heinlein novel, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* (that has a computer personality, and because it came out ahead of *Michaelmas* has credit for being the first book of its kind). All kinds of things are predicted in *Michaelmas*. By the way, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress* is a tour de force; it's a terrific novel, and I don't resent Bob Heinlein for a minute.

"Anyhow, nobody would buy *Michaelmas*. Fred Pohl made a wisecrack about: 'Gee, A.J., couldn't you at least have somebody go on a quest for Plutonian fire-lizard jewels?' Something like that, and when it finally came out I had carefully written a passing reference to Plutonian fire lizards just for the fun of it. *Michaelmas* has had a star-crossed history. There is only one edition – and it has had a lot of editions – that is relatively free of typos. The first edition – the hardcover book on which the British Science Fiction Book Club edition is based – has a lot of typos, 60 or 70 of them, and two crucial ones. In the monologue that Michaelmas makes about Horace Watson there is a reference to a process operating 'less slowly' – it is supposed to be 'more slowly.' I think the most crucial typo is when they decide what to do with Cicoumas' corpse. The book says: 'I

will send it home to him,' which only superficially makes sense. What I said in the manuscript was: 'I will send it home to *be* him,' which when you stop to think about it makes more sense.

"That book has constantly been plagued by typographical errors. For the Warner edition, editor Brian Thompson and I took the Berkeley paperback and went through it again and took out all the typos and handed it to their production department. And the production department apparently lost it and went out and bought another one, because not only did they lovingly reproduce every one of the original typos in the American first edition, they introduced a flock of their own. I can't read that edition. I just get angry every time I see it, but that's life! *Michaelmas* nevertheless did very well. Lots of people liked it.

"What else do I have to say about my novels? *Hard Landing* was conceived in 1974, so obviously it couldn't have had in it a lot of the things that it acquired over the



years, but that was because I kept having to drop it on account of other projects getting in the way. I didn't moan and groan about it. It just took a long, long time to write. As a result it has the ability to tell the whole story of Richard Nixon – in its own peculiar way – through the eyes of these flying-saucerites who survive the crash, and it is kind of nice. I liked it. I tell you right now, I like practically all of my stuff. Some of the stuff that I wrote when I was young and foolish, I am just as glad that it is dead and buried, but by and large I like my stuff. I enjoy being a writer.

"How I got to Evanston, Illinois, is kind of interesting. Harlan Ellison was here, editing Regency Books. He bought *Some Will Not Die*, and another novel called *Each Man Kills* which was never written. Through a combination of peculiar circumstances, mainly because of Harlan Ellison's wife Billy, I became the editor of Regency Books. Billy and Harlan were living in Kalamazoo, Michigan, which is where Billy came from, and Billy said to Harlan, 'I know you're going to leave me, but don't leave me in Kalamazoo. Leave me in Hollywood.' Which he did. He and Billy and Billy's kid drove out to Hollywood where, as you probably know, he sank without a trace and has never been heard from again. I stuck around.

"I was the editor of Regency Books for exactly a year and a half, then I was hired away by *Playboy*. Sixteen months into that my father died; 18 months into that I quit. It was an interesting job and I got to meet a lot of interesting people, but it wasn't going anywhere and it wasn't going to go anywhere I determined. So I quit.

We entered into a period of mild starvation. We had four boys by then and they ate ten-dollar bills for lunch and we didn't have that many ten-dollar bills. So I eventually went to work for a public-relations house. That was like dying and going to heaven; I had a lot of fun. I worked at it for four years and eventually got hired away by *Woodalls Trailer Travel* magazine. It was pretty nice. I had done a fair amount of automotive writing. Larry Shaw, who edited *Infinity* and a magazine called *Science Fiction Adventures*, also edited *Car Speed and Style*. I persuaded him to bring out *Cars Magazine*, which was a general car book. He did a hairy-chested men's adventure magazine for which I wrote an awful lot.

"Anyway, we had a lot of fun until the Arabs embargoed oil. Everything went to hell. I was laid off – I was laid off on my 44th birthday as a matter of fact. I went home and had my birthday party and then broke the news, which came as a bit of a shock to everybody. We went into another period of starvation. I have not had a paycheck, or a steady paycheck, in 19 years. Judy del Rey called and said they were making a movie out of *Who?* and could she have the tie-in edition, and I said: 'Certainly.' It was a lousy movie. In fact the American edition does not even mention a film, but the British edition does. It was a lousy movie in the sense that it was mediocre. It wasn't bad enough to become a cult classic, and it certainly wasn't good. *Rogue Moon* has been made into a student film in

California: I have never seen it, but I got a certain amount of money for it.

"Looking at your list of questions, you say, '...as of today, no alien artefacts have been found either on the moon or in the solar system.' That's true! Furthermore, I'm willing to consider the proposition: 'We are the only thing that is alive in the entire universe.' I think that makes just as much sense as the proposition: 'There are a lot of planets out there and a lot of stars and therefore intelligent life must have arisen.' Maybe, maybe, but if it must have arisen, maybe it didn't arise in the same time-frame as us. Maybe in some far distant day we will discover the traces of a civilization that died a long time ago. It is just as likely as anything. Nobody knows for sure. One thing I can be sure of: traffic among the stars is not going to be anything like the way it has been depicted. The story of the people who go to an alien planet and discover that it is just like Earth except that the trees are shaped differently, or the story in which the alien is pretty human except for the fact that he doesn't have skin, he has leaves. This is about as much fantasy as can be imagined. The story in which the man and the woman land on an alien planet and cautiously crack their helmets and discover that the air is perfectly breathable: that's not going to happen. We may very well go out to the stars, but I can't at the moment imagine what for... because, well, it's going to be different.

"If the idea for a good story occurs to me I will undoubtedly write it, but if it is a story about a planet that is like Earth except that the trees are different I will not fool myself for a minute that it could possibly happen that way. There is a difference between a construct for a story and a construct in real life. I don't think we can predict what NASA will do if it comes across an alien artefact, or even if NASA will *know* it is an alien artefact. These are big questions which, generally speaking, have not even been considered. Science fiction is off doing something else, which I love and which I intend to keep doing, but I don't kid myself for an instant that sf and reality are frequently the same thing."

I asked Algis Budrys about his 1950s stint as an assistant on the famous *Galaxy* magazine.

"I only worked for *Galaxy* for three months. Horace Gold was a tremendous ego and I was his first assistant editor. I hadn't been working for him for more than a day or so when we both realized we just weren't going to make it, but I worked cheap and Horace was reluctant to let go of me, so I lasted three months.

Finally I couldn't stand it. He was a terrible guy to work for. Alfred Bester sang his praises for forcing him to write *The Demolished Man*. If that is true, and I think it is, he deserves a lot of credit, but he is a wild-eyed egotist and in fact *Galaxy* magazine fairly soon began to show the effects of that. He mangled a lot of stories. He wrote the heart out of them. Most writers who were around at the time curse his memory. He's still alive, but I'm awfully glad that he and I don't have much to do with each other. Before *Galaxy*, first I went to Gnome Press, one of the many sf speciality houses which was wiped out in a few years when the big boys realized what science fiction was. From *Galaxy*, I went into freelancing; I read slush for dozens of magazines and I freelanced for no pay on the Lester del Rey magazines *Science Fiction Adventures* and *Rocket Stories* because of the enormous amount of experience I could accumulate in a short time – and to this day I am grateful to Lester. From there, I went to work for *Venture* which was a now-forgotten sister publication of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*.

"*Venture* was a phenomenon on the sf scene. People fought and died to write for *Venture*, and now it has completely vanished. Let's see... after Larry Shaw, after Regency Books, I went to work as coordinating judge on L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future contest and was eventually nominated as an advisor to L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future. I helped create and taught the Writers of the Future workshops based on some no-nonsense essays by L. Ron Hubbard on aspects of writing. That was fun; that was eight years of pretty dedicated effort. By the way, like everybody else who had anything to do with Writers of the Future, I had practically no contact with the Church of Scientology. I don't know what it does and I don't care. Eventually I turned over the coordinating judgeship to Dave Wolverton whom I had first found as a contestant. Dave is a Mormon. I'm an atheist. There was a fair amount of uproar in the science-fiction field when we did all this, but, by now (and it has been ten years) I think it's all right.

"After that I edited *Tomorrow* magazine. Dean Wesley Smith, the proprietor of *Pulphouse*, decided he wanted to do a science-fiction magazine, and that he wanted me to edit, and it struck me as an all-right ambition. So we put together the first issue and publicized it at the Orlando Worldcon, and it was doing all right. I was buying stories happily for it, I in Evanston and Dean on the West coast, and gradually I realized that

Dean was in serious financial trouble: the magazine would never see another issue. My wife and I talked about it for quite some days and, though we could just barely make it for a while, we took it over. *Tomorrow* has done well in every sense except financially. Hopefully it will gradually begin making money. I found Kandis Elliot, who takes care of the production and sells stories to me (and, more importantly, to *Asimov's*) and sells illustrations. She's a remarkable woman. She works for the University of Wisconsin as an illustrator. All of the stuff that you see by her in *Tomorrow* is done by her on a computer. She's a whiz at desktop publishing, and in September 1994 we published *Writing to the Point*. This is a non-fiction book on writing by me, utilizing the articles I wrote for *Tomorrow*. Next, if all goes well, we will bring out *Benchmarks*, my book of *Galaxy* sf reviews which came out from Southern Illinois University Press quite some time ago now. I would like to see a paperback edition of the book. If that goes well we're going to start publishing my novels and my short-story collections (and probably *Rogue Moon* will be called 'The Death Machine').

"How do I write? I write every way there is. Sometimes the characters begin talking in my ear. Sometimes they don't. Sometimes I do an elaborate outline; I have never done anything as elaborate as the one for *Rogue Moon*. I sold a book once on a portion and outline which went verbatim: 'The rest of the book will be done in as satisfactory a manner as possible.' It all depends. I've written about 200 short stories, I've written a flock of novels. Considering what else I've been doing, I've written an awful lot which will never see the light of day again. Hairy-chested men's adventure stories have a certain verve to them. My favourite is 'I Shot Down Castro's China-Commie Airforce,' which is unbelievable. It's a long story and it is just unbelievable – unbelievably good, that is. All kinds of pieces are scattered out there that nobody will ever know are mine. I think I have said that I am a good writer. I am! I don't think I get as much recognition as I should, but it is hard to claim recognition when you only bring out a novel every ten years or so. It used to be every five years, but I have slowed down. People forget you. It is not until they take a look at the body of your work, all clumped together in one place, that they realize you have been doing some pretty good work over the years. Science-fiction writers generally know me and respect my work and that, I think, is what counts."

I never expected him to be so beautiful. I knew he would come to me one day – hadn't I planned it just like this? – but I never anticipated his beauty.

He arrived on one of those grey, muggy summer days that are essentially English, days when great carnivorous slugs are tempted out onto the lane where they glisten like spat-out licorice. I was working in the garden, planting beans, and I straightened up and saw him standing by the gate. My immediate thought was that he was a ravishing young man, and my next, that I had not yet got around to replacing the number that had fallen from the gate-post, and could this delightful creature actually be looking for me?

"Are you Doctor Brandon?" he asked. His voice was a light tenor without an obvious regional accent, his attitude was slightly diffident, with a suggestion that I could not possibly be Ryan Brandon. I admitted to 80, looked 50, felt 150. I recall thinking that if I had been 40 years younger I would have had trouble keeping my hands off him.

He was a little too thin, a little too hungry for comfort. His eyes spoke of deep repression, hope being smothered by experience. I knew that look, I met it in my mirror.

"I'm Brandon," I told him and watched a flicker come and go in his eyes. He had hazel eyes, although his fair hair and skin suggested that they should be blue. "What can I do for you?"

There was a sense of something in him giving way, as if he had been held up by an invisible wire and was now released to the support of his own bones and muscles.

"I've been looking for you," he said. "I got your message."

It took me a while to understand what he was saying. It had been so long. Much more than the length of his life-time ago, I had written my name on a metaphorical piece of paper and slipped it into a metaphorical bottle and cast it out into the seas of the world. Here was my reply, this slender blond youth with bruised eyes and a gaudy sports hold-all slung over his shoulder, standing outside my garden gate.

"Come in," I said, putting aside my rake. He opened the gate and walked onto the path, looking down to avoid stepping on a fat black slug that I had left there. With luck, it was a carnivore who lived on its molluscan brethren and would do its bit to protect my lettuces. "I'm sorry," I said awkwardly, peeling off my gardening gloves and dropping them beside the box of bean seedlings, "I wasn't expecting anyone today." I felt at a dis-

advantage, gauche, feelings that must have lain dormant since adolescence and been

reawakened by seeing him here in my garden.

"If it's inconvenient –" He made an abortive gesture and I recalled my manners.

"No, of course not. Do come inside. I wasn't really expecting to see you in the flesh, you see. A letter maybe, or a call. You've surprised me. I'm Ryan Brandon, as you know."

"Toby Morgan."

He held out his hand and I clasped it. His flesh felt cool, smooth, pliant to my touch, I released it before I wanted to touch him again harder. He followed me into the house, waiting politely while I changed my gardening boots for indoor shoes. My house is impressive in a quiet, understated way, real wooden beams, tiled floors and antique furniture, very olde-worlde but not baronial. Although I am a rich man, I am not ostentatious. My neighbours do not even know who I am.

I went into the kitchen, touched the kettle into life and offered him a drink. We both elected to coat our guts with tannin and I made tea.

"So," I said gently, "what made you decide to come to visit me in person?"

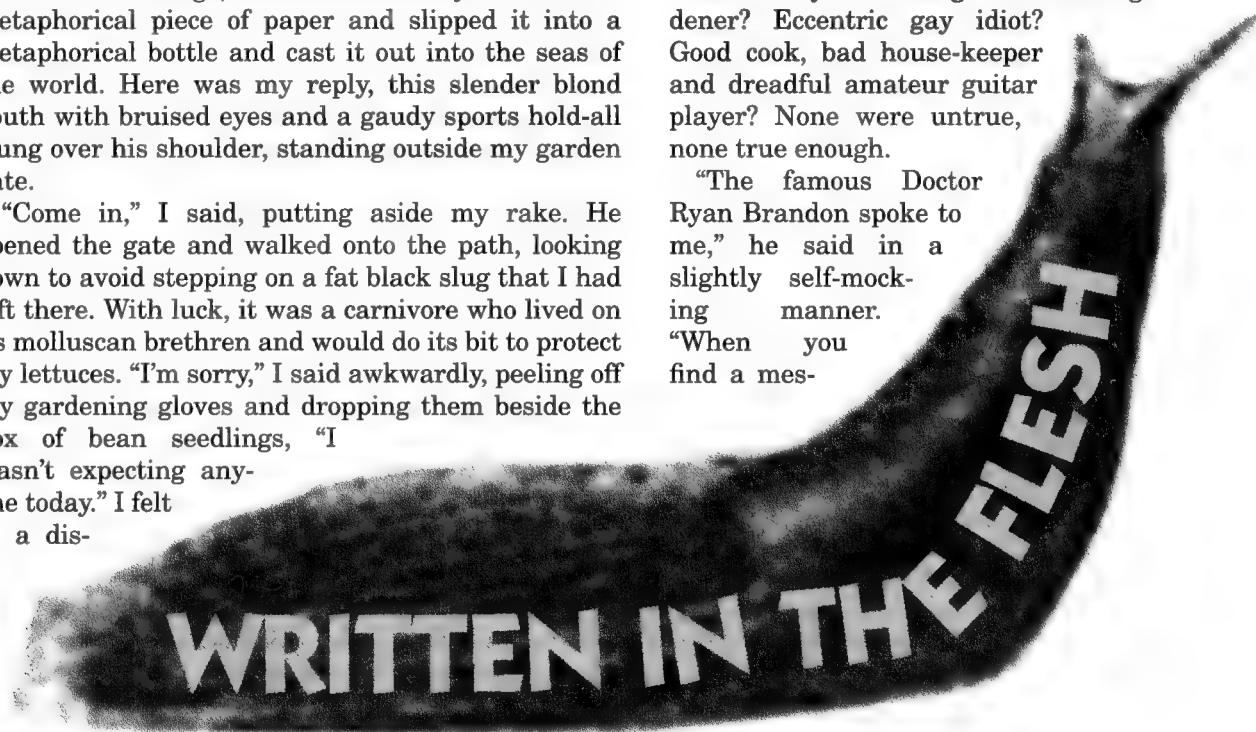
He sat down at the table, clasping his fingers around the mug as if to warm them. His hands were beautiful, muscular but compact, and very well looked-after, the nails immaculate. I only noticed because mine showed the callouses and the ingrained dirt of my gardening hobby.

"I don't know." He must have realized how he sounded because he smiled quickly and looked at me through a drift of unruly hair. "Curiosity?" he said, tasting the word. "I wanted to find out what kind of man you are."

I responded to his smile but not his words. What should I say? Retired genius? Keen gardener? Eccentric gay idiot? Good cook, bad house-keeper and dreadful amateur guitar player? None were untrue, none true enough.

"The famous Doctor Ryan Brandon spoke to me," he said in a slightly self-mocking manner.

"When you find a mes-



sage from a great man written to you personally, in the flesh, you're surely going to be curious? I took it to be an invitation."

"When did you receive it?" I asked, sipping tea and trying to appear guileless. Heaven knows I had had enough practise, and he seemed to accept my prevarication.

"My father died some months ago."

"I'm sorry." I meant it. This explained the damaged bewilderment in his eyes. I asked "Was it a very painful ending?"

He nodded, focusing on something I could not see.

"He had a tumour, diagnosed late. Although he was operated on, too many secondaries had already started up in his liver, brain and pericardium. He was only 52." His gaze came back to me again. "I was scared, Doctor Brandon, scared shitless."

"Of course, anyone would be. Was that when you asked for a gene-scan?"

"My mother told me I'd been mapped before birth – before conception. She gave me the disc with my map. My parents were kind, sensible, loving, supportive, they obtained parental status easily but failed genetic screening on – oh, a dozen counts? Twenty? A family history of epilepsy, asthma, heart-disease, osteoporosis, mammary tumours, you name it."

"So they decided to skip the gene-carving and go straight for pot-luck?"

He nodded.

"The Gene-Brand counsellor said they'd lose so much of their own genetic material they might as well just specify general appearance and let the computer do the rest. So they did. I'm not a scientist." He added the last word with a hint of defiance, as if he felt I might expect an apology. I smiled to reassure him. "I like patterns," he said more calmly. "I'm a musician. I wondered if there was music in my data and stuck the disc into my PC out of curiosity and told it to look for simple patterns. I liked the idea of playing part of my own genetic sequence, converting myself into pure sound. I found the flags and the Morse code, the patterns in the chunks of repeated genetic material."

I nodded. "So you read my name."

"Why?" He leaned slightly towards me, his amber eyes fixed on my face. "Doctor Brandon, why did you leave me a message in my chromosomes? What was the point? Vanity? Idle wilfulness? Flippancy?"

I poured more tea while nudging my tired old brain into top gear. How could I explain to this terribly young, intelligent, yearning boy?

"It was so long ago," I said and there was a flicker in his eyes, a veiled laughter. I felt myself blushing and made an apologetic gesture. If he had displayed scorn, how could I have borne it? "Would you indulge an elderly man and let me give you my life story?" I asked him, trying for whimsy. He shrugged slightly, a lift of his shoulders, ok.

"It began with the mice," I said, thinking back a long way. "I was a mathematician – stats and modelling. We still used animals in those days –" I raised a hand to forestall his exclamation of disgust,

"– yes, I know it was barbaric, but what we were doing made the cruelty seem worthwhile at the time. I was modelling the reactions of murine organs to stimuli, everything from temperature changes through different food-stuffs to carcinogens and radiation. I wrote the programmes and believe me, in those days you had to actually write them all by hand, there were none of those sophisticated masterprogs to design them, you sat there at a terminal and cobbled them together yourself! There were geneticists working away on human and canine and murine genomes, unravelling DNA, and there were modellers trying to predict how cells and organs and whole animals would react under differing conditions. Starting with the growth of bacteria in foods, we worked our way up until we were predicting the result of experiments on mammals, and in the end we were able to do away with all the animal experiments because our computers could predict exactly what effect any combination of factors would have on the entire animal – on an entire ecosystem." I could see that he knew all this. I was falling into lecturing mode. "I was in at the sharp end and you can't imagine what it felt like."

"Exciting?" he hazarded.

"Bloody boring, actually. I was made redundant when I'd finished one of the big mouse programmes; the unit was shut down at the start of the century."

Even now, after all these years, something stopped me speaking of the fire-bombs that the animal-rights campaigners had lobbed through our windows. "I started up Gene-Brand with a couple of friends. There were plenty of little companies like ours, we just happened to get in and then sell out at the right times. We brought it all together, the modelling and the genetic manipulation, we were the first to reliably predict what effect all the different possible genes would have on the whole human organism."

"An organism like me?" he said with a hint of steel under the soft voice. "I'm not a random selection of genes, Doctor Brandon. You designed me, you signed your name in my redundant genetic material. Why? Did you use your own code to write me?"

I laughed at that, or tried to.

"No, I'm not that much of a megalomaniac!"

"It doesn't take a megalomaniac to do it, Doctor Brandon, just a parent."

A coldness trickled through my guts like melting ice. I turned my head away to stare out of the window, at the soft rain hazing onto my garden.

"You don't have a family, that's a matter of public record," he said, pushing harder. "You have no son or daughter, you never contributed to a sperm bank despite your clean genes."

"No," I agreed, feeling like Frankenstein. All those mice had died for this.

"So did you design a son and leave him sitting in the Gene-Brand files when you sold the company?"

He ought to have been exhausting but instead he was exhilarating. Talking to him was like riding an unprogrammed horse. I clamped down on an exquisite and poignant spasm of lust.

"Your parents chose you," I said.

"My appearance, yes."

"The rest was surely left to chance and nurture. What do you do with your life?"

"I'm a violinist." He did not allow the change of subject to bewilder him. "They asked for manual dexterity and perfect pitch. My Mum plays the oboe in an amateur orchestra, I'm a professional musician."

I smiled. "You see? I didn't design you. There's so much left to chance. I signed my name as a kind of – a call, to see if there was anyone there, not to stamp ownership on you. How can anyone own another being?"

I sensed his scepticism as he watched me. I sat there in my old gardening clothes, probably smelling of sweat and newly turned earth, and suddenly the angles of his face, the lines of jaw and cheek and ear, were more than I could bear. I got to my feet and put the mugs into the dishwasher.

I could have told him that I had once made a silly, childish gesture, sending a coded message into the future like a label attached to a helium balloon, just to see where it might land. He would probably have accepted the lie, but after seeing that shape in him, the shadow out of my past, I could no more have lied to him than I could have lifted my gardening fork and thrust the prongs through his body. He was precious to me, more precious than I had dreamed.

"Do you see yourself as the designer of all the children born from the Gene-Brand data banks?" he asked.

"Not really." No, just the special ones, my darling. I wondered how many had never thought to look at their data-discs, how many had been born from a unique programme that sat like a virus in the middle of all the massive data banks. Every now and then, an approved parent would ask for a boy child with the colouring and size and abilities that fitted, and the little routine would slip a particular mix of genes out into the vats. Then a woman would lie on a white-covered table while a tube entered her body and placed a microscopic fertilized ovum inside her, and she would go out pregnant into the world. Nine months later, he would be born again out of a stranger's womb.

Toby shifted uneasily and I heard the soft brush of his clothes against the furniture. I turned, afraid that he was about to leave, and found that he was standing, facing me, his body taut.

"I'm sorry," he said rather formally, "I've said something to distress you."

I told myself that I was a famous man, a legend, someone out of the past. People like Toby read about me in college text-books, slipped in after Mendel, Darwin, Watson and Crick. Of course he was curious about me, fascinated by me. I ought to be used to such curiosity, but he looked at me out of those eyes and he held my gaze for so long, and my heart was pounding so hard that I was giddy.

"No," I airily waved a hand, trying to appear as sophisticated as my age should have made me, "I'm not distressed." Old fool, I thought, what are you

playing at? Romantic notions at your age? But when I suggested that he stayed for dinner, he accepted.

We dined on fresh produce from my garden. I made a delicate soup of herbs, I cooked tender peas and beans, carrots and potatoes, stuffed aubergines and peppers in a tangy tomato sauce which we mopped up with home-made bread. Then I served fruit, strawberries and raspberries with a citrus sorbet. Everything was washed down with my own wines, a fresh dry gooseberry white, a sweet flower-scented dessert wine and blackberry port, with wickedly extravagant cream in our coffee. I no longer craved meat but I recalled the days when a good dinner might have involved fish and game and roast beef. I doubted if Toby had ever eaten animal flesh in his life.

He ate tidily and quickly, complimenting me on my cuisine. We exchanged bits of information, I was avid for the details of his life. I drank him in with the wine, his deceptive fragility and intelligence, his flashing laughter and sharp wit, his strengths and vulnerabilities. When I leaned to collect the dishes and our hands brushed one against the other, I felt the physical shock of his touch through my nerves. Awful and wonderful, the moment of silent understanding, the moving together, his diffidence and then our first hard and ravenous kiss. I led him up the stairs without need of words, his strong hand in mine.

My belly was heavy with food, my head adrift on a lake of wine. I coveted him as he lay against me, fair-skinned and elegantly muscled. His chest was lightly furred with golden hair, how I loved that, and his sinewy limbs that gripped me in our heated embraces. The bedroom was as it had ever been, the walls painted pale cream, the tarry beams above, a few possessions scattered about on the pale pine furniture. Could I have dreamed that it would come to this? I seized him and took him again, desperate to exorcise my demons. We made love in my wide bed, exploring one another with urgency and then with languid pleasure. This was a moment out of time, a night snatched from my youth, a gift of such wonder I doubted my own senses. We drifted at last into sleep, pressed together like exhausted children.

Smoke boiled through the door and I fell back, bringing up an arm to shield my face. There was a sharp, oily stink of scorched fur and burning flesh. All around me, mice squeaked and scratched in their cages. Someone ran past shouting about saboteurs and there was a figure in the smoke, white overalls smudged with black. She was lugging one of the big fire-extinguishers in her arms.

"Linda, get out of there!" I shouted, recognising one of my assistants. "Leave it to the fire-brigade! Come on, woman, get yourself out, leave it!"

She dropped the extinguisher and came out, coughing and wiping her streaming eyes,

"Bastards!" she gasped when she could speak, then she stopped and seized my arm. "Ryan, did Steve follow me out?"

"Steve's in there?"

There are moments in a life that stretch out in both directions, casting their colours over everything to come and the memory of all that has gone before. I knew then that Steve was lost to me, as surely as if I had seen him fall down an abyss or be devoured by a shark. From that moment on, I walked in shades of darkness and all that had gone before was cast in the after-glow of autumn evenings. The smoke and heat drove me out although I tried to reach him again and again, I felt hands on me, preventing me from perishing with him, and the tears poured down my face. Then out of the flame-shot black strode a demon.

His eyes were wide and glassy, tubes ran from his masked face to the ungainly tanks on his back, his feet were clumsily shod. In his gloved arms he bore the blackened thing, the rigidly twisted remnant of my love. I stared again into the boiled white eyes. The sooty, delicate skin was lifting in curls. A voice called me out of whirling smoke, called my name and the voice was his, but he was dead, lost and dead..

I shuddered in Toby's arms, enclosed in his strength as he hugged me against his chest.

"What is it?" He stroked my face, his deft fingers wiping away my tears. "It must have been some nightmare!"

I nodded and swallowed, seeing the pale shape of his face overlaid by a blind, blackened skull. I mumbled an apology.

"You were calling someone," he said. "Steve?"

"He died." I pulled him against me, burrowing my head into the curve of his shoulder. "A long time ago. He died in a fire."

I could feel Toby's beating heart, a regular tremor under his flesh. I held him so tightly that his ribs creaked. For an instant I believed that we could melt together, our interfaces losing definition, molecules of my skin and his intermingled so that the distance between us was closed at last. I breathed in the scent of his flesh, crushing my face against his chest. I wanted to eat him, take him in until he was safe, carried in my body and shielded from fire. I wanted him to live for ever, unchanged in all his beauty. He seemed bemused by my emotion but he cradled me in his embrace until I was calm. I apologised and moved away, embarrassed that he had seen my weakness so soon.

"Who was he?" he asked. His voice was concerned, devoid of cruelty. Like Steve, he had a nose for the important things, seizing on the pivot of my life like a dog on a blood-trail. I was still bewildered by the remnants of the dream, there was a sour taste of bile at the back of my throat.

"A person I loved." I stretched out my feet, cooling myself between the sheets, feeling sweat drying on my back and my ankles. "I don't know what made me relive that old nightmare again after all this time. Isn't it funny how the mind works?" Then I saw the transparent curve of his eye against the grey square of the window, the thick-rooted lashes above his angled cheek, and I realised what I had said, how my lies were widening the abyss between us. I raised myself up on my elbow to look at him,

the shape of his body under the crumpled sheet.

"He was the love of my life," I whispered. "He was my assistant when we were working on the mouse genome project. He was fascinated by patterns. He was a gifted musician, he played the cello – that was how we first met, I play the guitar pretty badly. He should have been a professional musician. But, like most of us, he opted for what we thought would be a career in science and I offered him a job. His career ended when the animal liberationists bombed the research lab and burned down the animal unit. He was the only one not to get out of the building. I went on without him to start Gene-Brand."

There was a long silence.

"How did you map him?" he asked in the end. "From hair or nail clippings?"

"He'd taken a scraping of his own cheek cells to try out a technique we were using."

After an even longer silence, he said: "No-one else knows I came to see you. I just came here on a whim, I found your address in the telephone directory."

I sighed and settled beside him again. The implied threat failed to even increase my pulse, there was nothing he could do to hurt me now. How many times had I silently made Faustian pacts with the devil, a night in Steve's arms in exchange for my soul? Ten years from my life if I could just see him again?

"His photograph's over there." I switched on the bedside light and he brought Steve's portrait into the pool of illumination. Unselfconscious, he stood naked, turning the frame in his hands. Steve had been darker – Toby's parents had specified ash-blond hair – and Steve had long ago sustained a broken nose which had been repaired to a different shape, but in the structure of the bones one could read their shared ancestry. Toby looked from the old picture to me then back again. He placed it carefully, face-down, on the cabinet and sat beside me. Then he smiled.

"Did you really think you could get him back?"

"No. You're not him, any more than a child can be its own parent. You were born eighty years after Steve, your upbringing was completely different, you're you, unique and beautiful."

He shifted so that the bed creaked faintly. "Did he love you?"

"He told me how he felt about me," I said sadly.

He slid in under the sheets, turning to press himself to me, his breathing growing quick and deep with his increasing arousal. I wanted him so much that my viscera ached.

Toby, you can never be Steve. I wouldn't want you to be Steve, my darling boy, you weren't made for that. You're different. I knew how Steve felt about me and I can guess how you feel now, and I pray that you'll grow to love me as desperately as I love you. I hope I've got it right, or else everything I did was in vain and the mice all died for nothing. This time around, I believe you'll love me. I've written it in your flesh.

Sylvia M. Siddall last appeared here, just a few issues ago, with the short story "Housewife" (IZ 92). The above is her fifth piece for us. She lives in Northamptonshire.

AHEAD!

1: THE HEAD RACE

There's an old saying: it'll cost you an arm and a leg.

For me the cost amounted to two arms, two legs, and a torso. Everything below the neck, in fact. Thus my head and my brain would survive until posterity. How I pitied people of the past who were dead forever. How I pitied my contemporaries who were too blind to seize the chance of cryogenic preservation.

Here we were on the threshold of potential immortality. How could I not avail myself of the Jones legislation? The opportunity might not be available in our own country for longer than a couple of years. The population might drop to a sustainable level. A change of administration might bring a change of heart. There could be rancour at the cost of maintaining increasing numbers of frozen and unproductive heads.

Until then, though, we were in the Head Race with China and Japan and India and other overpopulated nations. The previous deterrent to freezing had been guillotined away. Now no one was compelled to wait for natural death by cancer or car crash – and thus risk their brain degenerating during vital lost minutes.

Farewell, likewise, to the fear of senile dementia or Alzheimer's! The head would be surgically removed swiftly in prime condition and frozen immediately. This knowledge was immensely comforting to me. It was also a little scary. I was among the earliest to register. Yet I must wait almost a month till my appointment with the blade. A whole month! What if I were murderously mugged before I could be decapitated? What if my head was mashed to pulp?

Fortunately, I was part of a nationwide support group of like minds linked by our PCs. To a fair extent our lobbying had finally resulted in the Jones Law. Yes, *ours*; along with lobbying by ecologists concerned with the welfare of the planet – and also, I have to admit, pressure from certain powerful right wing groups (but it's the outcome which counts).

So whilst awaiting decapitation (now a proud word!) there was quite a sense of emotional and intellectual solidarity.

As regards storage or tagging of our heads, would a distinction be made between idealists such as ourselves – and those who were incurably ill or who had despaired of their current lives – and so-called Obligatories?

Initially, the Obligatories would be processed separately by the Justice or Medical systems. Would storage be mixed or segregated? This remained unclear. We had no wish to stir any suspicion of discrimination! Yet surely there was a significant dis-

inction between idealists and non-idealists. The permission/identification form we all signed upon registering contained a box reserved for our motive.

Reportedly, the majority of idealists would be withdrawing from the world for altruistic, ecological reasons. Too many people on the planet for the health of the world! These volunteers would forgo their lives.

Enthusiasts such as myself nursed more personal motives, although I would never call those motives selfish. *Immortality* is not a selfish concept but is a watchword of faith in the survival and advancement of the human race. Immortality treasures what we have been, what we are, and what we shall become in the huge aeons ahead of us.

In a state of considerable excitement, we of the Immortalist Network confided the motives which we had inserted in our box.

To share in the Future.

To know what will be.

To reach the Stars. (That was mine.)

To strive, to seek, to find.

Manifest destiny of Homo Sap!

p = fpncflfifc. (Which is the famous Drake Equation for the number of extraterrestrial civilizations out in space.)

Even: To go boldly.

And, wittily: *I want to keep ahead.* (To Keep A Head. Ho!)

In the future world, would our heads be provided with new bodies? New bottles for the old wine, as it were? The Forethought Institute assured us that nanotechnology was just around the corner. Another 30 or 40 years, judging by state of the art and according to Delphi Polls. Eighty years at the most. Working in vats of raw materials, millions of molecule-size programmed assemblers would speedily construct, if not living bodies, then at least excellent artificial prosthetic bodies. These might be preferable to living bodies, being more resilient and versatile.

Even failing this, surely our minds could be mapped into electronic storage with the processing capacity to simulate entire virtual-reality worlds, as well as interfacing with the real world. Those who had despaired would be fulfilled. Idealists would reap their reward.

Ought criminal Obligatories to receive resilient versatile new bodies? Should their electronic versions be allowed full access to a virtual-reality domain? That was for the future to decide – a future where the roots of mischief were better understood, and could be pruned or edited.

With what hopes and longings I approach the decapitation clinic on this my last day. My healthy organs

Ian Watson

will be harvested for transplants. My heart and kidneys and retinas will disperse. My blood will be bottled for transfusions. I imagine the anaesthetic as sweet, even though it will be delivered by injection. I imagine the farewell kiss of the blade, even though the anaesthetic will rob me of sensation. Farewell, Old Regime. Welcome, the Revolution.

2: THE HEAD WAR

Smell, first of all, as the primitive reptilian brain-root re-awakens: an overpowering odour of hair-gel, though without any actual sensation of breathing. No lungs to breathe with?

Taste: slick and sour-sweet.

Sound: high-speed warbling.

Tactile: soft pressure all around my head. Otherwise: nothing at all, sheer absence.

Vision! Slightly wobbly, as if through liquid. There's a pyramid! It's composed of decomposing heads. Squinting sidelong, I spy another pyramid – of whitened skulls.

And another, beyond it.

I must be hallucinating.

Or else information is being presented to me symbolically.

My viewpoint is rising up, disclosing yet more pyramids upon a flat white plain, perhaps a salt-flat. Ovoids are airborne. Eggs hover and dart to and fro. One of these floats close to me. The rounded bottom is opaque. The transparent ellipsoid of the upper two-thirds contains a hairless head, surely female. I believe that a clear gel wraps and cushions the head. I must look likewise. Twin antennae protrude from the top of the egg. She's a mobile disembodied head. I mouth at her, making my lips form mute words. (*Hullo. What's happening? Where are we?*)

She mouths at me but I can't read her lips. No thoughts transmit from those antennae to what I presume must be my own corresponding overhead antennae. Her egg-vehicle begins to swing away. I urge mine to follow but it continues onward lazily under its own impetus.

Can this white vista, with its menacing pyramids and its hovering heads, be actual? How can this be? Surely my head is being used. What seems to be happening is not what is really happening. It is a by-product.

Of a sudden two head-vehicles rush directly at one another. They collide and burst open. Briefly two faces kiss bruisingly while spilling gel hangs down elastically. Moment later both vehicles plummet down to the salt-flat. There they shatter entirely. Both heads roll out, surely oblivious by now.

From under the surface, two mobile crab-like devices emerge. In their claws they seize the heads. They scuttle towards a fledgling pyramid. Clambering, they nudge the heads into position, upright, where I suppose they will rot.

The female egg hasn't gone away, after all. It – or rather she – is swinging back towards me. At least I think that it is the selfsame egg. Now it's picking up speed. It's rushing at me. Will we shatter, and kiss hideously, and fall? I'm terrified.

At the very last moment, my vehicle tilts. I'm staring upward at blue sky and high wispy clouds. A fierce blow strikes my base. Such a stunning shock vibrates through me. Nevertheless I'm intact. I haven't ruptured. I think I am sinking down slowly towards the salt. Slowly, slowly.

Of her, there's no sight. She must have broken against my base and tumbled rapidly. Overhead, a dozen heads cruise by. What grim aerial game is this?

Or is this the only way in which I can experience a selection procedure whereby worthwhile heads are chosen for survival? Whereby hundreds of thousands are discarded?

Have I been selected or rejected?

Again I hear that high-speed warbling, as of bird-song speeded up a hundredfold. With a slight bump I have come to rest. Sky and salt-flat and flying eggs and a nearby pyramid are fading – until I'm seeing only... invisibility. There's nothing to see, nothing to taste, nothing to hear. Is this worse than being a disembodied head used as a game-piece by unknown forces?

Amidst this deprivation, for the first time in many years, I find myself praying to a force I scarcely believed in. *Dear God, help me.* Will an angel appear to me, coagulating out of nothingness?

All that can fill this void is a million memories of childhood. Of schooldays. Of my parents (forever dead, gone utterly!). Of first sex, first drug trip, first sight of the steaming teeming canyons of New York through which by night the roaming wailing vehicles suggested to my mind lugubrious monsters prowling for prey...

Presently my memories attain a vivid visionary actuality against the all-pervading nothingness.

I realize that my identity is being reinforced and stabilized – and perhaps scrutinized. The episode of the flying eggheads was akin to a pre-uterine experience. All of those heads in the sky were equivalent to so many sperms surging for existence, all of them failing except for one, myself, being fertilised in that shocking collision and sinking down to become attached to the ground. Surely that was the significance. Maybe most frozen brains fail to reintegrate.

Now, like cells multiplying, my memories multiply until –

3: EMBODIED

— *I am embodied.*

I'm aware of *limbs*. Of arms and legs and hands and feet! They're so real to me, as I lie face downward with my eyes tight shut. How intensely I treasure this moment. I cause my limbs to move just a little at first, like a beached swimmer. My fingers wiggle, and my toes.

I feel ampler than I used to be. I'm larger, superior, more muscular.

Arms and legs and – *wings*...

Wings? Yes, great furled wings are socketed into my shoulders! Already I'm sensing which new muscles to flex so as to use my amazing wings. These wings are why I am lying face downward and not

upon my back; otherwise I would crush my wings uncomfortably.

Wings? Wings? A body with wings? Now I do open my eyes in wonder.

A veil of tiny flies fills the air, flitting around me like a myriad airborne workers around some vast construction project, which is myself. I have arisen. My new body is golden, ambery, its fabric not of flesh but of some flexible responsive robust plastic – inorganic yet endowed with organic performance.

This is a substance for which there is no word, since it never existed previously. Perhaps *protoplast* is a suitable term. Undoubtedly energy cells, charged by sunlight, are woven throughout my new skin, powering inner engines which can defy the thrall of gravity – else how, when I unfurl my wings, do I rise and hover like some colossal deity of this cloud of flies? The wings must be of some ingenious anti-gravitic bio-technology, to uplift my weight.

My head is still enclosed in a protective helmet. My new golden winged body is an ingenious prosthetic device sustaining and serving my natural head, in perfect harmony with my head.

Those flies are beginning to disperse, as if wafted away by my slow wingbeats. The veil is thinning – except over to my right. There, a dense cloud of flies begins to vibrate audibly. Vibrations become a voice, announcing my task...

4: THE COLOSSI

There has been a nanocatastrophe.

The Forethought Institute were correct in their promise of rampant nanotechnology transforming the world. (How, otherwise, could I possess this angelic body, golden and winged and of miracle substance? How else would this body interface with my head of flesh and bone and blood and brain-cells, sustaining and obeying and augmenting me?) Alas, the whole world is as smooth as a billiard ball. Farewell to mountains and valleys. Farewell to forests and seas. Farewell, likewise, to all the species of fish, flesh, and fowl which once inhabited sea or land. Farewell to all plants and fungi and bacteria.

Due to the nanocatastrophe nothing remained of life except for these sealed frozen heads of ours, preserved perfectly – as if the human race had intuited the need for such a global insurance policy in the event of a nano-plague.

When I say that the planet is smooth and perfectly spherical I am omitting to mention the hundred equidistant colossi which rise from the surface. Seen from space, under modest magnification, the colossi might seem like so many individual whiskers upon a huge chin, or like so many stiff short freak hairs upon an otherwise gleaming bald head – few and far between, and exactly spaced.

Seen from the ground – or whilst hovering with our wings – each colossus towers vastly and baroquely up through the clouds. Some are still under construction by the untold trillions of mobile microscopic nano-assemblers, or by larger macro-machines forever being assembled and disassembled. Other

colossi are almost complete, soaring to their designed height of ten kilometres.

Rooted by deep thermal spikes which exploit the inner heat of the planet, these colossi are *ships*. When the construction is completed, their matrix-engines will all activate in unison. This will generate a global matrix-field. As the world implodes towards a vanishing point, all of the thousand great ornate darts will be translated outward simultaneously through the cosmic matrix – not to mere stars in our own galaxy, but each to the vicinity of some planet roughly similar to Earth yet in a different galaxy millions or tens of millions of light years away.

This is the Project for which the world was smoothed flat, erasing all life in the process, except for our preserved heads. Expansion throughout the universe!

5: BUT...

But even at speeds far slower than that of light, surely nanos in tiny vessels could reach the furthest part of our own galaxy within, say, 20 million years at most. They could arrive in other galaxies within a hundred million years. The universe is due to endure for 50 times longer than that. At least!

Why the urgency? Why convert the entire Earth into a catapult which will destroy itself?

The pace of activity of microscopic nanos must be far faster than that of creatures such as Man (and Woman) – yet why could the nanos not become dormant en route to the stars, like spores, simply switching themselves off?

The reason for their hurry provides an answer to the *Von Neuman Enigma* – as I discover in conversation with another golden Angel nine kilometres up the ship to which we are both assigned.

The Von Neuman Enigma: If life already arose anywhere in the universe and sent out self-replicating probes, why is the universe not already full of probes? In the whole of the cosmos did adventurous, intelligent life only ever arise on one single planet, Earth?

My companion and I soar on thermals, ascending alongside the ship. We arrive at a platform in the stratosphere. With our robust bodies of protoplast we are to assist macro-machines to construct a spire which will support yet another tier of the colossus.

My companion is Hispanic. With bald tan head enshrined in transparent holder fixed upon golden body – and his wings folded dorsally from shoulders down to knees now that we had arrived high above the clouds – he is magnificent. Daunting.

After some labour we rest... not that our new bodies ever became fatigued. We do not sleep, though we might daydream while we absorb nutrition through valves in our ankles. Nanos in our heads repair any physical degeneration. A device in our throats permits us to speak aloud.

"What year do you think this is?" I ask my colleague.

"The Year Zero," he replies. His comment makes sense. All human history has vanished except for

what we each remember. The time of the nanocatastrophe constitutes an absolute gulf between *before* and *now*.

I broach the matter of the Von Neuman Enigma, which bothered me even in the old days.

"The answer," he declares, "is that the Hayflick Limit applies to all social entities as well as to individual organisms." Such is the profound conversation of angels.

But of course, but of course...!

The bugbear of the damned *Hayflick Limit* used to torment me. Body cells only replace themselves a finite number of times before the process fails. For human beings this limit is seventy times or thereabouts. Then comes decay and death.

"The Hayflick Limit also applies," says this Hispanic angel, "to the Congregation of Nanos. Social entities such as civilizations obey the same limiting constraint as the cells in bodies – a law as binding as entropy. No matter how well the nanos stabilize their collective activity, over a period of millions of years this would lose all coherence."

"Collectively they would suffer entropy..."

"Exactly so!" he tells me. "With our slower thoughts, we serve as an anchor – as the *root* from which they arose. Their source and origin. We are their touchstone and criterion. Their pacemaker, their talisman. Furthermore, in an important sense we provide purpose. People uniquely possess a sense of far-reaching purpose – because that is our nature. This is true even if only one person remains in existence, provided that he never yields to despair."

In the terms of a ship (for the Colossi are certainly ships) we are, quite literally, to be –

6: FIGUREHEADS

— figureheads, no less!

At the very summit of each colossus, protected by a cone of energy, right there at the tip of the ship, one of us will ride head-first.

On a thousand colossal ships a thousand proud heads (attached to protoplast bodies) will each gaze upon a new galaxy, and a new world similar to Earth.

Translation through the matrix will ensure comparability – similarity as regards mass and diameter and distance from a star which will closely resemble Earth's own sun. The planet in question *might* be barren, or be at boiling point due to greenhouse gases, or be an ice-desert. Yet surely hundreds may be habitats of some kind of life, or potential for life; for cosmic companionship.

This, mine eyes shall behold...

A thousand ships, a thousand heads! What if more than a thousand heads still survive?

At this moment the Hispanic angel launches himself at me.

How we wrestle. How well-matched we are.

Our struggle ranges to and fro across this uppermost platform. Will he try to butt my helmet with his own, to crack it open if he can? When I realize that he has no intention of risking this, I am less cautious in my grips and clutches.

Pulling free and half-turning, he unfurls his wings to buffet and batter me. I punch with all the force of my golden fist at the base of one wing... which sags, which droops. I have fractured the attachment.

We are at the edge of the platform, where a thin breeze streams by. Gathering myself – and against all former human instinct – I hurtle against him, carrying him over the side along with myself.

For a moment, as we fall, he can't free an arm to grasp me. In that moment I deploy my own wings and release him.

Down, down he drops, crippled, spinning single-winged, accelerating willy-nilly. Nine kilometres he will fall to the billiard-ball ground. I'm alone upon the ship except for machines and invisible nanos.

7: TRIUMPH

The Project is complete at last.

I stand erect, the very pinnacle of the galaxy-ship. No thunderous surge of acceleration will raise this colossus upon a column of fire. When the matrix-field activates world-wide – when the smooth ball of the world begins to implode – translation will occur instantaneously.

Even so, like a swimmer upon the highest diving board I raise my golden arms above my bottled head, palms pressed together steeple-style as if to leap and cleave the heavens.

Do my nine hundred and ninety-nine brothers and sisters likewise signal their imminent departure?

A humming vibration commences.

8: FULFILMENT

Lakes of brilliant stars! A ball of blinding yellow light which is the local sun! Its radiance illuminates a full hemisphere of another nearby ball – a world white with clouds and blue with ocean, mottled with land-masses.

Earthlike. Similar...

Maybe the oceans and the land are sterile. Maybe not. To stare from space at this spectacle is to be Columbus and Cortez and Captain Cook all in one. I may be ten million light years away from my birthplace. Or a hundred million. This, in itself, is an ultimate achievement.

All because I dared to be decapitated!

Within a day or so, my colossus will be in orbit – like some titanic statue equipped with a tiny living head. I assume that the nanos will reshape the ship into hundreds of gliding wings which will descend. I presume that provision will be made for me.

Or what purpose could there be?

Ian Watson has written many stories for us before, ranging from "When the Timegate Failed" (IZ 14) to "Swimming With the Salmon" (IZ 63) and beyond.

Another of his *Interzone* tales was reprinted as the title-piece of his last collection, *The Coming of Vertumnus and Other Stories* (Gollancz, 1994). His most recent novels are *Lucky's Harvest* (1993), its sequel *The Fallen Moon* ('94), and a "Warhammer 40K" epic for Boxtree, *Harlequin* ('94).

I hadn't expected to feel for the passing of *The Next Generation*. In seven years I never watched a complete episode, and was aware of it more as a background presence on the periphery of cultural vision. It belonged not to us but to our own generation's TNG, for whom its soothing narratives, childlike characterizations, and action-figure costume sense were an essential fixation in their development. They would talk you through the characters with the combination of infinite patience and bewildering speed that children use for educating adults in things that truly matter. It became something you learned to see not with your own eyes but, vicariously, through a child's; a revival of innocence, not a damp and dispiriting reversion to the myths of a bygone world, but a lever for the awakening of wonder at the vastness of space and history. It goes without saying that the history of the *Star Trek* dynasty mirrors that of sf itself: from cult to mass industry, a minority enthusiasm appropriated, tamed, and mass-reproduced by the forces of market capitalism, leaving a few embittered old buffers mumbling into their glasses over their radical youth and how much more dangerous their fanzines were than anything on primetime nowadays. But even the most cynical have to concede that the *Star Trek* mythology has become a kind of viral reality like Borges' *Encyclopedia of Tlön*, with more speakers of Klingon worldwide than Icelandic, and that no better tool for imagining the future has penetrated so far into the consciousness of so many.

So it was an unusually complex and affecting experience to watch *Star Trek: Generations* put TNG through the autodeconstructive reflection on its own mythology by now obligatory in *Star Trek* movies. Quite apart from the eerie coppers-getting-younger feeling of seeing these parvenus inherit the movie franchise, series characters by their nature arrive on the screen trailing rich, if inane, histories of earlier acquaintance, so that each irksome nuance of their wafery characterizations vibrates with the resonance of myth. Like reading the *Foundation* trilogy in the wrong order, this sensation is possibly more impressive if you haven't seen the original; for all their camp charm, I certainly wouldn't relish the company of Riker and Data for 150 further episodes. But there's an undeniably powerful sense of ritualism and reverence, of participation in a collective myth, in the significance with which the most banal and formulaic actions are invested by their repetitive re-enactment of the timeless in time:

MUTANT POPCORN

Nick Lowe

receiving the distress call, sitting in the holy chair, speaking the words of power, eulalizing in Scottyspeak till the menace to the universe is contained ("Releasing drive plasma ... there's just no way to disrupt a gravimetric field of this magnitude ... it may be possible to simulate a torpedo blast using a resonance beam from the deflector disk ..."), and all the traditional technical flimflam over shields in the obligatory shootout with metal-cleaved Klingon bandit queens. Yet all the while, enough remains of the cheesy setbound quality of the smallscreen episodes to permit creative restaging in an average kids' bedroom. ("Look! On the scanners!" "Wow!" "Yes, it's a huge temporal nexus coming right this way!" "What shall we do, Captain?" "Reverse the polarity of our tractor beams and see if we can push it away!" "It's not working!" "Er ... try a photon torpedo!" "Missed!" "OK, brace ourselves for impact... Ksssh!" "Bwccchhhh!!!" "Pwooommm!")

In a funny way, though, the most mature thing about *Generations* is that it renounces that terminal sense of embarrassment about itself that hobbled the first-generation movie sextet – that dreadful need to be ironic towards its own idiocies and to insist on being really about something else. The cast of TNG seem an easier-going lot, less vulnerable to the tantrums of control that Shatner and Nimoy employed to derail the first movie series; and the prospects look good for a triennial supply of cheerful space-operatic fluff with a cosy line in homespun humanism and thrifty ensemble characterizations. Indeed, the very juxtaposition of Kirk and Picard makes for an arresting confrontation of styles, in series ethos as much as in individual thespianship. Shatner is (to these weary eyes, at least) quite uniformly dreadful, especially without his old team-mates to do routines off: hideous to look upon, his crumpling features grotesquely made up in a ghastly parody of youthfulness, and more painful yet to watch doing character, with his repellent bacony attempts at roguish charm undercut by that insistent twinkle that says "of course, it's all bollocks, you know".

Stewart, by contrast, is as ever quite scarily professional and fine, so nearly capable of making this dreadful dialogue and tragically underwritten character sound resonant, human, and moving. "You

never met my brother and his wife, did you?" he prompts shrink Troi, his voice trembling with the unspoken words: "and neither did the audience, but now as you can see I'm terribly affected by the death in a gratuitous housefire of two completely ad-hoc characters that in any properly developed scenario would have been planted in my history seven seasons ago." (The audience, at least, is prepared for this by Kirk's earlier "Sulu? When did he find time for a family?" – expressing his surprise that, while he was looking the other way, a fellow cast member of three decades went out and got a life, allowing his replacement in the cast by a more affordable daughter.)

As for the actual plot, the most audacious element is the undisguised lift from *Solaris*, whose final scenes seem intentionally homaged by the sequence in Kirk's hyperspatial retirement cabin. Considered merely as a cosmic McGuffin, the Nexus is as absurd and overgenerous a device as the "emotion chip" Data turns out to have been hiding in his bathroom cabinet that could have solved all his problems of relating ("I am unable to grasp such a basic concept as humour") in 1987. But as a way of talking about the paradoxes of timelessness and change, ageing and its arrest that have become the major theme of the *Star Trek* movies, it's in its way as eloquent and sophisticated a metaphor as it was in the visions (deep breath, but quite seriously) of Lem and Tarkovsky. "Time," we are relentlessly reminded, "has no meaning in the Nexus": it's where you go when your series is cancelled and you live out your days in the golden, eternally-youthful world of neverending reruns. In this happy land, lost youth, lost dreams, and the life your character never had can be endlessly rewritten and relived: Picard can have a wife to spoil him with cups of Earl Grey and five kids with sweetly hopeless attempts at English accents; Kirk can be rugged and backwoodsy and do slightly blurry horse stunts where you can't see it's a double. Needless to say, we are reassured that real heroes can't be so easily contained: "it's not real" (JLP), and you can't "make a difference" (JTK), so it's back from retirement to punch out Malcolm McDowell on a rickety bridge on one of those off-the-peg desert alien locations. But truly incorrigible postmodern *ironistas* (do get a life,

you sad Baudrillardian obsessives, still clinging to your pitiful sixties cult) will be bound to note that we never actually see when and how the Captains escape from the Nexus to planet Death Valley, allowing the lingering suspicion that the whole climax is itself just another Nexus illusion, and that even Kirk's heroic death in the line of duty is just another day in his private Zimiamvia.

At the same time, though, and in clever counterpoint to all this flirtation with eternity, the very metamorphosis from series into movie carries with it a new acceptance of time and change, as constants of the little screen are released for irreversible rewriting. Thus Worf the tokenistic Klingon can get promotion; Brent Spiner can be issued at last with a licence to emote (rather a regrettable innovation, on the evidence here); the *Enterprise* can be written off in a slow-motion disk crash; and Wil Wheaton can softly and suddenly vanish from the cast in tacit acknowledgment of the collective wishes of

alt.wesley.crusher.die.die.die. And the moment such irreversible change is allowed to touch the world, not one of the timewarping, themeparking fictions of either Holodeck or Nexus can stave off the ultimate confrontation with mortality. It's no accident that all of the Star Trek movies have been centrally about death, albeit with widely-varying degrees of earnestness and explicitness; and one of their more creditable achievements, for all the sentimental hokum wrapping it up, has been the exploration of an openly gerontocentric point of view on declining opportunity, youthism, and the passing of torches.

"I'm going to miss this ship," is Picard's obituary on his newly-terminated vehicle; "she died before her time." Yet his consoling thought is that, though the individual may perish, the dynasty lives on: "Somehow I doubt that this will be the last ship to carry the name *Enterprise*." Of course, whether *TNG* itself has the legs for another five movies, and whether *Deep Space Nine* and *Voyager* will be anything like as durable or forgivable as their progenitors, lies in the gift of Generations yet unborn. But in the meantime, cue computer-generated champagne bottle wheeling through starfield to baptise a new vehicle for the screen as a fresh roll of credits spool to their climax... And William Shatner As "Captain James T. Kirk" (quotes *sic*), any last words? Cut to final extreme close up: "It was fun. Oh my." Ah, such eloquence in one so very, very old. *Requiescat in pace*; or, that failing, simply *requiescat*.

Nick Lowe



AN SF SITCOM SUCCESS

Jane Killick

BBC Television's *Goodnight Sweetheart* is a situation comedy based around a simple science-fiction idea that works on its own terms. While providing the requisite laughs, the writers treat their sf scenario with respect. TV repairman Gary Sparrow (the wry, intelligent, ever-sympathetic Nicholas Lyndhurst, pictured at the head of this column) becomes an unwitting time traveller when he gets lost in the East End of London and suddenly finds himself back in the year 1940.

As his present-day friend Ron (an *echt* science-fiction fan) puts it, he has "stumbled through a hole in the space-time continuum and found himself in a parallel universe, but at a different point in history."

The 1940s gain a romantic hold on Gary when he meets barmaid Phoebe Bamford (Irish actress Dervla Kirwan with a surprisingly good Cockney accent). Shuttling back and forth in time, he enchants her with his gifts of chocolate, his optimistic tales of the future (disguised as "America" and

"Hollywood"), and his talent for composing love songs (which in reality will be written by the likes of Rogers and Hammerstein, Elton John and the Beatles). He becomes absorbed in her and in the period — which makes up for his somewhat mis-matched marriage to the level-headed Yvonne "back home" in the 1990s.

The love story is at the heart of this delightful comedy. Gary and Phoebe are drawn together by the best their respective societies have to offer, and yet they are kept apart by 50 years. In the 1940s Gary finds a world where men had a purpose in fighting for their country, and Phoebe finds that Gary brings hope of a better life in the future where women will be free to do what they want and not what they are told. The irony is that Gary is as much trapped in his marriage with Yvonne in the liberal 1990s as Phoebe is with her absent soldier husband Donald in the conservative 1940s.

By bringing these two periods together writers Laurence Marks and Maurice Gran are able to make witty comments on modern life. They point out some of the advances that have

been made, for instance in the area of women's self-determination, while reflecting on some of the qualities we have lost — and, not least, on how many material things are taken for granted by late-20th century people. But these social reflections are only there if you look for them: on the surface this is an entertaining romantic comedy.

Marks and Gran are very accomplished sitcom and comedy-drama writers (*Shine On*, *Harvey Moon*, *Roll Over Beethoven*, *The New Statesman*, *Love Hurts*, etc) and they don't disappoint with *Goodnight Sweetheart*, where the humour is entwined seamlessly with gripping storylines, effective characterization, and the fascination of time travel. The clash of 40s and 90s cultures make for some great moments: for example, in the past, Gary is accused of being "unmanly" when he gives Phoebe's father mouth-to-mouth resuscitation; and, in the present, he dives for cover thinking he's in the middle of the Blitz, when it's only a firework display. But Marks and Gran never play it for laughs at the expense of drama, and for this reason the label "sitcom" might seem

inappropriate to some viewers. Situation comedy it may be, technically speaking, but *Goodnight Sweetheart* has as much in common with the *Terry and June* as *Red Dwarf* has with *May to December*.

The programme is now coming to the end of its second series. I saw the final episode of this new series being recorded last year at Teddington Studios, and it still has all the elements that made the first series a joy to watch in 1993. My only worry is that new writers may be brought in and that any future series may go the same way as *Birds of a Feather*, another comedy from the same stable. Looking at some of the dreadful episodes being churned out by that show's newer writers these days, it's hard to believe *Birds...* was quite a good sitcom when Marks and Gran originally created it. If the same fate befalls *Goodnight Sweetheart* it will be a great shame, because at the moment it really is a gem of a series — one which should appeal equally to old and young, to *EastEnders* viewers and to science-fiction fans.

Jane Killick

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The Crash Investigator

William Spencer

She was a woman of few words.

"Where?" was her sole comment as the officials greeted her at the helipad. She brushed aside their voluble welcome, her face taut and purposeful.

The two Interior officials sensed the urgency of her desire to get started. They led her to the site where the crash had occurred.

It was an ordinary enough Workpad. The Crash Investigator's professional eye took in the scene at a glance, noting the three nodular heads of the psy-scanner poised above a standard body-contoured cradle.

Empty now.

The more senior of the two officials spoke. He looked as if he'd enjoyed too many expensive lunches. He gesticulated too much, over-emphasizing certain words. His hands were plump and white, his eyes bulged, and he was sweating slightly.

"We have, of course, hospitalized the victim and placed him on life-support, in accordance with standing orders. This procedure, as you are no doubt aware, is the regulation practice in such cases."

He searched the Crash Investigator's face for some kind of agreement or approval, but in vain.

Despite this lack of feedback, the official's flow of verbiage was unstoppable. "The usual symptoms are manifest. Total catatonia, with nil response to external sensory stimuli. We may assume that the vegetative processes will continue to be sustainable, provided that appropriate intravenous feeding is maintained. The EEGs, however, detect no sign whatsoever of any higher brain activity in the cerebral cortex. The unfortunate victim is – if one may so phrase it – absent from his body."

It was time to get to work.

"So." The Investigator's tone was abrupt, her gesture peremptory. "Please leave me."

"Naturally, I need hardly say, if you need any additional information or support – anything at all – if we can be of the slightest further assistance – do not hesitate to avail yourself of our good offices."

"Yes, of course, feel free, you can count on us," the subordinate official chimed in, feeling that he had contributed too little to the conversation. His senior looked at him coldly. Getting above himself, was

Thompson, showing no proper sense of decorum. He made a mental note to pull him up short at the next available opportunity.

Still the two of them hovered, hesitated, shuffling from one foot to the other.

"Go!"

It was impossible to mistake the tone of that last explosive command. The bureaucrats left in a hurry.

Some stiffness in the Investigator's manner relaxed now. She was happier when left alone with the machines. The meaningless pleasantries of social contact left her cold. She had no small talk to offer in return. With a machine – particularly with a digital machine – you knew exactly where you were. (Most of the time.)

She looked more closely at the equipment ranged round the Workpad. There was a load of gear on the benches surrounding the control couch. Some of it looked a bit out of place. She could see keyboards, rhythm generators, samplers. Non-obvious stuff. But the central operating system was straightforward enough. This model was the latest GS4-C – a fast neural network of multi-terabyte capacity, linked in the usual manner via the cerebral-coupling interface of a standard psy-scanner. Nothing unusual there.

But somewhere in that ramifying network of artificial neurons a man's psyche was trapped. The thinking part of the man had slipped into the machine.

Nothing strange in that either. People did it all the time. They interfaced so closely with their favourite computer that they formed part of it for a while. On a mechanical level the same thing could happen: to a racing driver, for instance. He would become so finely attuned to his machine that it functioned as an extension of his own body. Ditto for a stunt pilot, if he was to be any good at aerobatics. Something like that had to happen if his manoeuvres were to dazzle the judges with real snap and sparkle.

The difference was that when you interfaced closely with a neural-network computer, your psyche encountered a kindred regime. It took to the sympathetic environment like a duck to water. It could flow fully into the silicon, leaving minimal activity going on in your skull. Just an irreducible life-support system in the central brain stem maybe – the

bare minimum needed to keep the body ticking over on a housekeeping basis.

Suppose then the computer suffered a crash. Went ape. Went total bananas. You were stuck, kaput. Trapped in limbo. You were sunk in a silicon valley of the shadow of death, with no easy way back to the biological world.

Such cases were tricky. The Crash Investigator needed all the skill and tact of a cerebro-surgeon if she was not to become an unwitting executioner. Imagine the helpless victim, trapped in the neural matrix like a butterfly pinned to a cork pad. One false move and a chunk of psyche could be destroyed instantly. Another inadvertent blunder, and the whole lot was gone.

Impassively, the Crash Investigator went through her check list. Power supplies. The most obvious cause of trouble. No problem there. The back-up source was fully functional. And in any case 98 per cent of a GS4-C consisted of no-refresh neurons. Your data could survive indefinitely with the power off.

Time to get to closer grips. She eased herself into the contoured cradle and placed her neck in the firm V-shaped support. She could feel the buzz of the psy-scanner as it tracked across her cortex.

She focused her brain, marshalling her thought-signals, willing the computer to come alive.

There was a slight glow from the holographic display. Otherwise nil response.

The trouble was, of course, that the psy-scan had been set up for one specific operator and matched to a particular neural profile. It would require a complete re-calibration to get it functioning with another person.

She tried another approach with some spoken commands. "Begin." "Boot up." "Proceed." "Log on." Nothing. She tried speaking louder, clarifying her vowels, emphasizing her consonants, sharpening her articulation. Still nothing.

The Investigator rose from the control couch with only the slightest gesture of impatience. She considered for a moment. Then she took from her briefcase a small keypad. This had got to work – it was a last resort in such intractable cases. She searched for the socket. Luckily one was still provided, even though the keypad was more or less a museum piece.

LEDs began winking on the computer's central processing unit. That was more like it. She tapped in a few brief commands. The holo display wavered, fluttered through a series of random waveforms, then locked into a coherent image. It showed the back of a man's head, alongside the printed message: "No processing time is currently available. Have a nice day."

The Crash Investigator sniffed and shrugged her shoulders. She took another item of gear from her briefcase – a videophone this time – and punched in a number.

A woman's face appeared.

"Lynn. Sorry to bother."

"Yes, what is it now, Kate?" The woman in the phone had a breezy, relaxed manner. The corners of

her mouth turned up in tiny parentheses.

"Slight problem. Pseudo-crash. Think we have one for you here."

"Nothing doing, I'm not..." The rest of the sentence was lost in an unintelligible mumble.

"Say again?"

"A mouthful of cake." The woman swallowed, clearing bits of sweet cake from the corners of her mouth with a fingertip. "You choose the damndest times to phone. I'm not really shaping to swan out anywhere tonight."

"Please. For me. Definite case for a psy-doc, this. Interesting one. Put you on your toes."

"You're pushing your luck, Kate." The woman considered the plea, nibbling at another piece of sugary cake. There was a measurable pause before she spoke again.

"All right. But remember – you owe me one for this. I wouldn't do it for everybody. So what's the location?"

The Investigator fed the map co-ordinates into the phone's keyboard.

"OK, sit tight. I'll be over as soon as maybe. Just give me time to find something suitable to wear."

"Just come as you are."

"I can hardly turn up in a silk bathrobe, darling."

It seemed a lengthy wait before Lynn arrived. But when she did, she was smartly dressed, crisp, businesslike.

"Have you gained access to the process recorder?" she queried.

"Impossible. Nil response."

The process recorder would give a readout of transactions occurring in the final seconds before a crash. It resided deep in the central nexus of the computer – an array of memory cells immune to voltage spikes and suchlike power glitches. The cells configured themselves into a closed orbit, to emulate a loop of recording tape which kept endlessly revolving.

"Keep trying, then. You're wasting my time otherwise." She could be as brusque as the other woman, when the working mood was on her.

The Investigator did indeed keep trying. But in vain. Pounding the ancient keypad, she sent a whole series of peremptory commands to the computer. All that ever came in answer was a steady view of the rear elevation of a man's head, and a dismissive message which, in various semi-polite phrases, told them to get lost.

The holo image exhibited some perverse properties. The rear view of the man's head remained obstinately a back view, whichever side of the 3-D display you looked at. It was a bit like trying to chase a squirrel round a tree-trunk – the canny beast was always on the other side. If they got smart and the two of them looked at the image from opposite sides, then both were rewarded with a rear view of a man's head.

It was irritating, dispiriting, enervating.

Lynn fidgeted at finding so little to do. At length she snapped: "Kate, if this is going to be an all-night job, I vote we drum up some refreshments. What say you?"

"Valid point."

She called up a fax of the menu of the local restaurant on her phone, and let Lynn peruse it. The latter made a great performance of finding something to suit her taste. Then the Investigator briskly ordered the same.

"Look, Kate, why don't you relax for a while? Give it a rest, then come at it afresh when you've eaten."

With a quick, decisive movement Lynn seized the keypad and laid it on the bench. The Investigator's eyes opened wide. She looked just like a small child whose favourite toy has been suddenly wrested from her grasp. But she made no audible protest. Evidently the other woman had a way with her.

"It seems the guy who operated from this Workpad was something of a music junkie," Lynn said. "All these synthesizers and keyboards all over the place."

"True."

There were banks of the gear, all stacked up in seeming disorder. Just about every spare centimetre of bench was covered with sheaves of print-out, most of it scored with music staves over which the black notes crawled like warrior ants on the march.

"Why don't I entertain you with some music, while we're waiting for the restaurant courier to arrive?"

Lynn went to the nearest keyboard, told it to come alive, and struck a chord or two, experimentally. An immense, reverberant sound filled the domed interior of the Workpad. There must have been a considerable wattage of amplifiers on line to the keyboard. Each note she struck was doubled or trebled in differing timbres across several octaves, to emerge as an overflowing niagara of sound.

"Wow!" said Lynn appreciatively. "Quite a set-up. I didn't know they made them like this any more."

"Indeed, wow." The Investigator's tone verged on emotion. "Look here." She indicated the display, from which Lynn had temporarily turned her attention as she addressed the keyboard.

Now a man's smiling face had replaced the irritating back view of the head. "Give me that chord in F-sharp again," said the man in the display.

Lynn obliged.

"I like it! I like it!" The face became animated. "I'm Jeff Stokes, by the way."

"Pleased to meet you." Lynn gave him the full impact of her smile. "You're keen on music, I take it – judging by all the gear?"

"I adore it. Can't get enough of it." The face clouded momentarily. "But there's not a lot of scope for that sort of thing in here."

"Too bad. I'm sorry to hear it." Lynn's sympathetic tone implied a whole world of commiseration.

The man in the display hesitated. "I say, could I be awfully boring and get you to do something for me?"

"Of course. What would you like done? Anything within reason, I'm yours to command."

"That's very decent of you. I wondered – could you possibly grab that 40-way cable that's lying loose on the bench? Get me on line from the CPU to the J-99 synthesizer?"

"OK. You're on. No problem at all." She snaked the cable out and made the connection, giving each plug

a final tweak to make sure the pins were fully home in their sockets.

"There you are, my friend."

"Excellent. Now I can run over something I've just composed. I hope you'll find it interesting."

The arching chamber filled once again with a torrent of sound, but this time the music marched forward purposefully in architectural magnificence. Great chords crashed and reverberated in the confined space, while above the growling bass rode a serene melody in the upper register.

Lynn found herself picturing a scene in which a flock of pale seabirds went wavering like a frail garland above an Atlantic storm, gliding perilously above the dark turbulence of massive waves that threatened to engulf them at every moment. Despite herself she was transfixed. She could feel herself being drawn out of the body by the insidious enchantment of the music. Time and space were lost to her.

But the Investigator, who seemed to be tone-deaf, was fiddling furiously with her lap-held as though she were a player hooked on some obsessive computer game. Her fingers raced over the keyboard as though time was not on her side.

When Lynn came to herself again she noticed that the display showed the image of a man also lost in rapt concentration. But that image was slowly fading. Soon it was replaced by a sequence of abstract patterns which rippled and danced in time to the music. She realized that every note was being transposed from aural to visual terms, finding its own equivalence in form and colour, as in an experience of synaesthesia.

When the music drew to a climax and finally declined into silence, the display also faded, leaving only an uneasy blankness.

With a start, like someone emerging from a waking dream, Lynn looked round the room. Her eyes came to rest on the Investigator, still busy at her keypad. Lynn put on a rueful expression.

"Sorry, Kate, I blew it. I believed I was gaining his confidence and finding common ground, establishing rapport and all that. I thought that a spot of sympathetic understanding could open a channel of communication between us. But now I appear to have lost him altogether. He's retreated deep into the machine, abandoning this boring old outside world."

She put a hand on Kate's shoulder. "What a total idiot I've been. All those degrees in psychiatry – oodles of painfully acquired expertise – all that has led me precisely nowhere. I owe you an apology, Kate."

"Nonsense!" The Investigator's tone was emphatic. "You did OK. While you spoke, I accessed the process recorder. Dumped the whole lot into my lap-held." She tapped the small machine. "All here now. Twelve hundred megabits, safe and sound."

"You cunning minx. I always knew you were a devious one, Kate." Lynn grinned broadly. "So what have we got?"

There was a discreet tap on the door, and the refreshment courier arrived. They paid him off. But the two of them were by now far too engrossed in their work to think of eating. They watched the pro-

cess recorder cycle through its contents via the cramped little display of the lap-held. The food grew slowly cold, untasted.

"So that's how it was."

A woman's face appeared on the display. She was singing a melody. Even in the tinny acoustics of the lap-held it was impossible to mistake the enticement of that sensuous female voice. There was a haunting, wordless appeal in the sound that was older than human language. The message plunged deep into the brain to trigger some ancient hominid memory.

Now the man – Jeff Stokes – appeared alongside the woman in the display. Hesitantly at first, he joined in the song. It became a duet, with his fine voice harmonising the melody at a lower pitch.

"See?" The Investigator could not keep a hint of triumph out of her voice.

"*Cherchez la femme!*" chuckled Lynn. "I get it. That's why he's no longer outside the computer, looking in. He's inside the machine – drawn there by the beguiling music."

"So what do you make of it?"

"I'd say the poor man was seduced. He didn't just become too deeply involved with his algorithms. He was enmeshed in their tangles by the feminine psyche of the machine."

"Oh, come on! 'Feminine psyche.' A bit much, surely..."

"But you saw her. She's there – inside the computer."

"An image. Plausible, no doubt. But just a bunch of binary code. Nothing more."

"Yes, but how did that image come to be there?"

"Somebody put it there, maybe?"

"You mean..."

"A trap."

"You might have a point. Yes, it could be a cleverly contrived stratagem. And a near-lethal one at that."

Lynn gave the matter some more thought. Then she smiled broadly. "Isn't there another possibility? Our man, Jeff Stokes, has slid inside the computer, right? Suppose a woman operator, somewhere, had chosen to do exactly the same? Suppose she sidled along the network, and cosied up to Jeff? Two love birds on the same network branch, cooing together."

"A hypothesis. Let's test it."

The Investigator called up the female image on her small display, enlarging the face until it filled most of the screen.

"Now watch."

A central line was struck vertically, bisecting the face. The two halves then moved apart until they were on either side of the display.

"Now. We flip them over."

The mirror image of each half appeared alongside it, making two whole faces.

"They're both the same," Lynn admitted.

"Check."

The two halves converged until they lay on top of one another. When they were in perfect register, they proved indeed to be identical.

"Computer image, for sure." The Investigator's tone was flat but definite. "Real woman would be

asymmetric."

"Yes, I think you've made your point. Unless of course a real woman, on merging with the computer, chose to pretty herself up in all sorts of ways. She could give herself not just a nose job, but a cheek job, eye tuck, chin lift, all the rest of it. She could tinker with her image to her heart's content, until she achieved total symmetry, and with it perfect beauty."

"Oversubtle. Implausible."

"Maybe. Or maybe, Kate, your mind works differently from most other women."

Lynn began to tuck into some of the food, by now gone cool. The coffee, too, was distinctly tepid.

"So who could have done this?" She chewed thoughtfully. "Who would have wanted to set a snare to entice Jeff Stokes into the machine?"

"An enemy. Settling a score."

"We need to check his personal files."

"I have clearance."

The Investigator plugged her lap-top into a spare socket on the bench, and fed in her password and a few other essential commands.

A readout of Stokes' personal data began to appear on the screen. He was unmarried, had no family, lived alone. There was very little to go on. His life appeared to be all but featureless, according to the files.

"He doesn't seem to be the kind of guy to make enemies."

"Who can tell?"

"Have you considered another possibility? Suppose he was being blackmailed. Some trifling peccadillo perhaps, which to a lonely man could be made to seem like an enormity."

"His financial file, then."

This too was called to the screen.

"It all looks very straightforward."

"Yes."

"There's a standing order here for an annual payment to a music society. More or less what you'd expect – given his obvious interest in matters musical. And look at this. Here's a sub to an amateur artists' group."

"Man of many talents, evidently."

"So probably he could have shaped the female image for himself. May I look at something?"

She took the lap-top from the Investigator's hands and played with the controls.

"Yes, that's interesting. You see here, what happens if we take Jeff Stokes' own face, and apply to it the standard male-to-female conversion factors. We enlarge the eyes, neaten the nose, trim the ears, soften the jaw line, make the hair fuller and longer. There now. What we get is very close to the woman-image in the computer."

"So?"

"But don't you see? That's just what one normally does, when one sets out to create an ideal human image. It's quite usual for artists to take themselves as a model. Only in this case Jeff Stokes has given us the female equivalent of himself."

"Incestuous."

"But that's the way it works."

The Investigator allowed herself a mouthful or two of food while cogitating this new line of enquiry.

Lynn continued. "So where does that leave us? It still may not help us very much. Our job is to extricate J. Stokes from the computer network, right?"

"Right."

"And how did he get snarled up there in the first place? He was enticed by a fetching female image."

"Go on."

"To get him back out again, we need a still more enticing image outside the computer."

"Yes...?"

"But outside the computer means in the real world. So maybe we need a real flesh-and-blood woman to do the trick."

"Could be."

"That gives me an idea. Maybe the girl in the computer has a real-life prototype. Do you have access to the entire personnel files of the organization?"

"Say the word."

"I just wonder if there might not be a girl in this very organization who matches, more or less, Jeff Stokes' ideal."

"Why should there be?"

"Look at it this way. A lonely young man sees a girl in the corridor. She works in a totally different department, let's say. But this girl conforms to his ideal – she's almost a female version of himself. After that, he glimpses her occasionally in the staff restaurant, but she's always sitting at another table and he's too shy to approach. So what does he do?"

"Pine away?"

"No – he makes a computer image to match the girl of his dreams."

"Yes?"

"But then the ploy gets a trifle too successful. The girl is so attractive that she makes him want to join her, right there inside the computer."

"A cyber-playmate?"

"Once inside, he doesn't want to come out. He organizes a pseudo-crash of the machine."

"Right."

"So now I think our line of action is clear, don't you?"

The Investigator nodded.

It proved a protracted search. The lap-top was not good enough at pattern-matching to perform the task unaided. Painstakingly they combed through the files of all female personnel in the organization. Their eyes were beginning to blur with fatigue, had almost reached the stage when all faces look alike, when Lynn shouted "There she is!"

The screen depicted a young woman in Purchasing. The Investigator called up the image in the computer which had captivated Jeff Stokes, and placed it alongside the picture of the flesh and blood woman.

"Virtually identical."

The cramped interior of the Workpad was crowded with people. Officials, medics, close relatives all jostled to get a clearer view of the proceedings.

The comatose body of Jeff Stokes had been lifted from a hospital trolley and laid gently in its cradle

facing the holo display. The psy-scanner heads looked down at his forehead.

Lynn and the Investigator had been crowded out almost to the back of the melee. Lynn whispered: "Do you realize we've been here all night?"

Lines of weariness round the Investigator's eyes were her answer.

Centre-stage was the young woman from Purchasing. The difficult bit had been to persuade her to take part in the experiment at all. But on learning what was at stake, she had agreed. Now she was seated at one of the music keyboards, brightly lit by spotlights. She looked even more ravishing in the flesh than her photograph had promised. A small video camera nosed towards her, feeding an image into the computer.

The senior official, revelling in his role as master of ceremonies, raised a white pudgy hand and called for silence. The hubbub slowly subsided.

"Dr Hollingsworth, can we begin?"

"Yes, by all means," said Lynn.

The official nodded to the girl. She allowed her fingers to caress the keyboard, her touch roving from octave to octave. Her skill, which happened to be considerable, was not really tested. It was only necessary for her to simulate the action of playing – the synthesizer's memory held all the necessary notes.

Again a mighty surge of sound filled the Workpad to overflowing. Its effect was overpowering now, with so many observers packed into a limited space.

The music rolled and thundered in magisterial grandeur. But all eyes were on the inert form of Jeff Stokes.

Yes, it was happening. His eyelids fluttered weakly. His mouth pursed and pouted as though struggling to form coherent words.

His eyes snapped open, blankly at first. For a moment his pupils dilated and contracted, seeking a sharper focus. Slowly his head turned, and his gaze locked on to the figure of the girl at the keyboard. An inarticulate noise, somewhere between a cry of wonder and a groan of despair, rose to his lips.

Lynn turned to the Investigator. She smiled. "This could be the start of a beautiful friendship," she murmured. "Come on, Kate. We're not needed here any more."

"Evidently."

Lynn's smile broadened. "Fancy some breakfast at my place?"

"What a thoroughly excellent notion." It was the nearest the Crash Investigator got to eloquence.

They sidled towards the exit, unseen by the medics, the officials, the family. Sounds of relief and celebration followed them as they left.

Jeff Stokes had come back to the real world.

William Spencer has written two previous stories for this magazine, "Striptease" (IZ 72) and "The Tyranny of Numbers" (IZ 79). He also wrote quite a number of stories for *New Worlds* and *New Writings in SF* back in the 1960s. He lives in Sussex.

SECRETS OF THE UNIVERSE

Past *Ansible Links* have told how famous-in-some-circles sf writers Brian Stableford, Colin Greenland and I have been deluged with sf plot ideas from an allegedly young, ailing and – usually – female correspondent going under countless pseudonyms. Colin became grumpy when this person wrote to the BBC posing as Colin Greenland; months later the same happened with Channel 4 and me; and then the BBC sent a polite brush-off to a familiar-sounding correspondent who had given *Interzone*'s address and claimed to be the precocious young "Master Stephen Baxter." Meanwhile John Gribbin unexpectedly chimed in to say he'd been hearing from this correspondent, via *New Scientist*, for years. After – in Brian's words – pooling information and applying the calculus of probability, the lucky authors now think they have an address at which their shy benefactor can reliably be reached. Available on request from this column! Plot-starved writers please take heed!

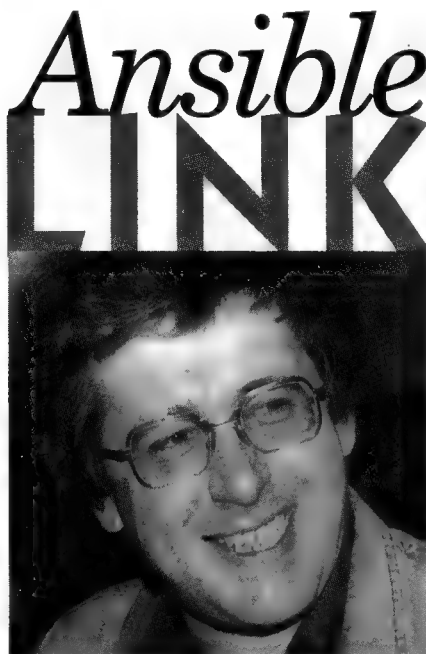
The Pelagic Argosy Sights Land Stephen Baxter boasts of a glowing endorsement in the HarperPrism US edition of his *Anti-Ice* ... "He writes like I used to.... I should have him assassinated before it's too late! — David Niven." Mr Baxter adds: "Sadly for Niven, author of *The Moon's an Inconstant Balloon* and *Bring On the Flying Horses*, it really is too late."

Poppy Z. Brite gained the ultimate accolade – her 5,271,009th exposition of how she's actually "a gay male in a woman's body" made it into *Private Eye*'s coveted "Pseuds Corner." After enquiring carefully about the significance of this, the feisty author opined that the *Eye* staff should kiss her butt.

Arthur C. Clarke was awarded an honorary D.Litt from Liverpool University (home of the SF Foundation – can this be coincidence?) earlier this year. Inevitably it was all done by satellite link between the State Broadcasting studios in Sri Lanka and Liverpool University's Senate Room; equally inevitably, the technology wasn't quite advanced enough to be indistinguishable from magic, and there were tense delays before the great moment....

David Garnett, in a logical next career move after editing *New Worlds*, is now famous for 15 minutes on the back of a cornflakes packet. Kellogg's are offering free Power Trax Trucks (corresponding roughly to our Terran "toy cars"), whose named drivers include Dave "Crazy Horse" Garnett. Fame indeed.

Andy Sawyer, all-potent SF Foundation master, gleefully points out the HarperCollins press release for William Horwood's *Journey to the Heartland*, which claims it as "the first positive portrayal of wolves from a major fiction writer since Jack London's *Wolf Fang*."



David Langford

It's not so much the failure to get the right title for London's best-known work, as the nagging sensation that Garry Kilworth's positive portrayal in *Midnight's Sun: a Story of Wolves* was published not all that long ago by... oh dear! (Endorsement on next edition: "Not a major fiction writer! — The Publisher.")

Bob Shaw is "feeling healthy and optimistic these days," after a long grim period following his late-1993 cancer operation. "At one stage of the surgery they must have been able, literally, to look right through me and out the other side. I have now got over the physical aftermath..."

Ian Watson is no longer a millionaire, he wails. Easy come, easy go. The fiendish rearrangement of the Polish currency has reduced his vast holdings (Bank Handlowy, Warsaw) from 1,525,550 zlotys, or enough for a few beers, to a puny 152 zlotys and 55 grosz... still enough for a few beers, but it just doesn't feel the same.

INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

Arthur C. Clarke Award. The 1995 shortlist debate saw a deadly hand-to-hand struggle between judges C. Amies, J. Gribbin, D. Langford, M. McDonald, M. Plummer and D. Seed, while impartial administrator D. Barrett (and administrator-to-be P. Kincaid) made disinterested remarks like, "I say that one's total rubbish – don't you dare shortlist it." And the list is: John Barnes, *Mother of Storms* (Millennium); Pat Cadigan, *Fools* (HarperCollins); Gwyneth Jones, *North Wind* (Gollancz); Paul McAuley, *Pasquale's Angel* (Gollancz); James Morrow, *Towing Jehovah* (Arrow); Kristine Kathryn Rusch, *Alien Influences* (Millennium).

Afterward John Clute gaped: "I don't believe it! There's nothing actually embarrassing!" But at the time there was one shortlisted book he had yet to read...

Mnemonic Mole. One sf fan working in the same building as post-production work for the *Johnny Mnemonic* movie reports signs of disaffection... small sticky notes have been appearing about the place, with the words "Fuck you" or "Piss off" or "I hate" added above a rubber stamp of the film's logo. What can this mean?

Son of Trivia. TV University Challenge question: "Who was the famous father of this person?", the photo being of Alan Clark MP. King's School of Medicine and Dentistry, hopefully: "Arthur C. Clarke." No such luck; it was Kenneth Clark alias Lord Clark of Civilization....

Dickery. "Tim: I have moved out. Won't be back for a long time. Goodbye. Phil Dick" – this hand-printed (and reputedly mendacious) 1972-ish note to Tim Powers will set you back \$750, as priced in the bargain catalogue of US bookseller Ken Lopez. If only Dick had commanded \$50 a word in 1972.

SF Awards with Impact.

It is being suggested, in the smoke-filled rooms where people plot their Hugo nominations for 1994 work, that a blindingly obvious candidate for Best Dramatic Presentation is Shoemaker-Levy 9.

More Good Bits. "Louise remembered the ancient, beautiful names. *Pan*, *Atlas*, *Prometheus*, *Pandora*, *Epimetheus*... Names almost as old, now, as the myths from which they had been taken" (Stephen Baxter, *Ring*). "I tossed her one of the cans of beer. She took it without saying anything, cracked it open, took a mouthful and wiped her hand across the back of her mouth" (Geoffrey Maloney, "Requiem for the General"). And the time police in *Timecop* swiftly confirm that time-thieved Confederate gold bullion is indeed from 200 years ago: "It's genuine, we've had it carbon dated."

Enturbulated Thetans. The "Church" of Scientology has been in the news again lately, this time battling the Internet: legal threats against net sites allowing free-speech discussion of Scientology, forged "cancel" commands of unknown origin which strangely erase only the messages of anti-Scientologists, heavy pressure on anonymous-remailing services which allow dissidents to speak out without fear, etc. etc. Bruce Sterling wistfully summarizes (by e-mail, of course) the prevalent sf view: "Perhaps some day, in stark futurity, people of goodwill (euphemism for you and me) will be able to dance a rickety arthritic fandango over the final grave of Scientology."

The Glad Who Sang A Mermaid In from The Probability Sea

John Grant



I slaved aboard a vessel called the *Ten Per Cent Extra Free*. I was one of a hundred hundred slaves on a ship of crafted metal of sleek lines and curved shine and unthinkable size – it was a month's walk from one end to the other.

We moved from system to system, picking up extra Finefolk slaves to replace those who died of pining or of beating. And we embarked Ironfolk families by the hundred; rich families and soft families, usually, but often with the look of defeat in their eyes. We were not allowed to go too close to them, for fear we might steal their weans – as if we would wish to (although sometimes the weans fled to us, recognizing that the same light shone in us as shone in them). The families were leaving their homes to be taken to new and echoing worlds across the great ocean. The Spiral of Andromeda was beckoning them, flaunting its faded starry finery at them, promising – false-promising – that all was fresh and virginal there.

The Ironfolk have a liking for virginity, believing it to be the natural order of things. This is one of the

tapestry of beliefs that has always shielded their eyes from the reality of the Universe. Virgin purity is something that must be *created*; reality is rough and promiscuous and noisy, with whisky on her breath.

The Spiral of Andromeda is absent from my sky. I have no wish to see reminders of my time of slavery.

Qinefer, my flass, is telling the weans a story here on the beach. They are draped, one either side, across her thighs as she sits cross-legged on the sand; their eyes are upturned shiningly towards hers, which are brown and deep like peaty, slow-moving river water. Tickles and hair-tugs punctuate the tale.

"So Brightjacket speaks again to the gathering," she says, for she is well past the once-upon-a-times in her telling, "and this time he punches his chest like *so* and he draws himself up to his finest height, and he says, 'The Ironfolk will see us dead, or will bend us to their chores. Have they not already banished the songs out of the streams? Is not even the



Illustrations by R. Morgan

cool voice of moonlight stilled, so she and the wind can no longer sing their wistfulness together in the pine-branches? Have the Ironfolk not cast their nets of crafted metal across all the land, caging us? Yes! – and here he strikes his chest again, only harder (harder than I would strike yours, my little glad) – ‘All of this destroying they have done in their lack of grace, and there is no one who can tell when they will cease to do so. We have watched them in silence, if we have dared not to flee.’”

It’s an old story, of course, one dating right back to the times before the World. I grin and listen in on it, pretending she won’t know I’m doing so.

“‘The Ironfolk’s railways,’ says Brightjacket, ‘are like the spores of a dandelion clock, drifting everywhere, coming down anywhere, stiffening the land’s music – *our* music – with the crafted metal of which they are shaped. When was the last time the Finefolk could dance in the Vale of White Horse? Or in a ring around the Cairngorms? Or among the tors – the tors *our* folk built – of Dartmoor? Twenty years? Fifty?’

“And the eldern among them nod, as do the fly weans. For metal that is shaped is graver to our kind than viper’s bite or scorpion’s sting – which are, my bonny young flass, more painful far than even your mother’s skelp.”

The two of them laugh together, the mother and her daughter. In this moment they are a single age. Which is as it should be. For all her words, Qinefer has felt neither snake’s nor scorpion’s wrath; the creatures of my world are peaceful with us, obeying the notes I instructed the inshore breeze to pluck on the sea-reeds. But I gave her my memories when first she swam ashore from the probability sea, which is why she knows of bites and stings and can tell the story of Brightjacket, and of how he led our kind to the Freedom. Though some memories I kept from her.

“‘You nod in the simulation of wisdom!’ cries Brightjacket angrily, and all hush at the anger in his voice. ‘Wooden puppets can nod so, when their strings are tweaked!’ he says. ‘But wisdom is more than knowing, or its pretence: wisdom is also *doing*,

when the doing is wise!

"None of them there like this overmuch. The eldern can recollect the times before the Ironfolk came, and all the Earth was a room for play. Even once the shaping of metal had begun, there were places in plenty where people could escape its bindings. Such places, indeed, there yet are; but shrinking, like rainpools in the hot sunlight. Now, here where the Finefolk have foregathered, deep in a cavern some forgotten hand once carved out beneath Snowdon, it's as if they can hear the dead noise of the chains close to them. What Brightjacket is doing, my wind-haired ones, is looking ahead, seeing a time when the rainpools will be all gone, as the interstices in the net of the railways are filled in by the roads where crafted-metal creations likewise roar. The seas are not immune to these monsters, and neither the skies overhead – although not even Brightjacket foresees how the scattered metal birds will one day flock. But the Finefolk do not like being reminded of the future.

"All the time it's getting worse," he says into the silence of their resentment. "Soon there will be no room for us even to pipe simple Changing-spells, or to sing the song that brings Sirius's winter rising."

"But what can we do?" says an eldern dismissively – or maybe it was several eldern, or all of them together, their beards making a sound like cuckoo-spit shaking loose. "We cannot fight the Ironfolk, not without weapons of crafted metal, we can't; and they alone of all the Earth's creatures have ears deaf to our music. I have myself hurled a Chord-of-dying straight into the face of one, and he heard not a gnat's whine!"

"You're right," says Brightjacket forthrightly. "We cannot fight them. The time we might have is a million years gone. And we cannot stay, and let ourselves be destroyed. So surely you must see there is only one course open to us?"

"All is silence again. They know what he is talking about – naturally they do, for our folk have never been without wits, although often stupid, and blinkered, and loath to change their doings. But knowing a thing and admitting you know it are two quite different matters."

"Like you not knowing Daddy's been listening to you the past few minutes?" says Larksease. She looks at me, then cringes back into the crook of her mother's arm as I glower my most impressively.

"That's not quite the same," says Qinefer, a laugh briefly splitting her voice into separate strands, "but it's near enough. Now, pay attention to me, you impudent minx – and you, too, my twitch-nosed buffo – and let your father do as he wills. Otherwise you'll never know what happened to Brightjacket."

They pay dutiful attention, even though they've heard a thousand times what happened to Brightjacket.

"We cannot fight, and we cannot survive if we but bide," he says at last, his chin in his palm as if he were thinking all this afresh. "So what is there is left for us to do? Why – we must surely flee!"

"This makes a growl rise above the heads of young

and old alike, as if Snowdon has heard Brightjacket's words and is gruffly disapproving. If you've never heard an angry mountain speak its anger, then you don't know what anger sounds like." Two pairs of wide eyes on hers. "For a while it looks as if they may join their voices in a song that would rend Brightjacket one limb from the other, but he holds out his palms to them, and at last the moment is past.

"Another eldern pushes his way to the fore. 'Our people do not flee!' he bellows. 'We have always faced down peril. We are not cowards, are we?'"

"And there's a huge bay of agreeing to this, of course. Grand words are always good to cheer to; they've killed more armies than weapons have. Not one of the folk gathered there wants to stand up and say, 'Yes, I'm a coward. I admit it, and I want to save my furry skin.' Not one of them except Brightjacket, but he doesn't put it quite that way.

"It is our duty," he says gravely, "to do all we can to preserve our kind. To stay here is to accept not just our own deaths but also those of our weans; and from *their* weans we would be taking away the chance of their first opening of their eyes. Can any among you here say we have the right to throw away those lives?"

"Once again there's a hubbub. Some folk say he's right; others say he's just weaving spoken-words, making a Deceiving-chord too subtle for any of them to recognize as such. But the end of it all – and the end is a long time in coming, I assure you – is that more than three-fourths of the folk in the cavern say Brightjacket's right, and only flight can save the Finefolk. But where can they flee to? Even the ocean's deeps are being plumbed by the Ironfolk and their tools of crafted metal.

"To the stars," says Brightjacket in response to their question, and he begins to laugh a little-boy laugh. "To the stars – that's a place where we gallant lads and fair lasses can hide from the Ironfolk."

"I told you our folk are not fond of looking to the future, so no one thinks to say there are only so many stars in the skies, and sooner or later the Ironfolk will take themselves and their machines to those places, too. If anyone thinks of that, they believe it to be so many millions of years away it hardly matters. Even Brightjacket – who keeps quiet on the subject, as he would – believes that at least *thousands* of years must go by before the Ironfolk learn the simplest music, let alone the complicated harmonies that must be meshed to open the pathways across the greater seas to the stars. And he's right, of course – the Ironfolk have *still* never learnt to play the living music, and I doubt very much if they even know it exists. What he doesn't reckon on – none of them do – is that the crafted-metal machines might become strong enough to batter their way through the waters of the interstellar oceans; and then, later, that the Ironfolk might discover a way of skipping across the crests of the probability waves."

When I gave Qinefer my memories, there were a few

I held back, not wishing her to live a life of fear. By the time the Ironfolk had discovered how to skip the waves, they'd also encountered enough of our worlds to have found out about the living music. I doubt if any of them will ever learn to play it, still less to sing it; yet they are aware enough of its existence to know they should fear it, and to take precautions against letting any of our kind give voice. They know, too, that it is their crafted metal that stiffens the living music in us; this is why, when they come to each new world, they swiftly ring it with their steel-and-aluminium space-sailing vessels, so preventing us from opening up the oceanic pathways and escaping.

My world was taken thus. Qinefer's recital of a bugaboo tale for the weans, even though I know it better than she does, has picked the scabs off memories. Ours was a well populated world, with upwards of 100,000 of us – almost as many as had once dwelt on Earth. Perhaps fifty score escaped; another fifty score died in futile fighting; the rest of us were loaded into colony vessels much like the *Ten Per Cent Extra Free*, so we could slave for their owners and in due course their passengers. In the last, of course, we were intended to be still slaving for them on the worlds in the Spiral of Andromeda.

The inside of the *Ten Per Cent Extra Free* was a horrible place of silence. Oh, there were spoken-words, of course, both Ironfolk and Finefolk, but the metal walls shut us off even from the faint music of starlight. There were birds aboard, but they were kept frozen in the hold; I do not know if this was to spite us, or just if the Ironfolk were not only deaf to birds' singing but also blind to the colours of their feathers and the thought-focusing hardness of their eyes. Not even the soft susurrations of insects was permitted: they were killed on sight, or poisoned in their nests.

We plotted. We dreamed strange, music-less dreams. Some of us cursed Brightjacket, wherever he might now be, for having led our folk out into the archipelagos of the probability sea; others, wiser, knew he had at least postponed our fate until now, which was something we should be thanking him for. There was much foolish talk of sundering the walls of the vessel, so air and water and bodies and all would be flushed out into the ocean voids. It seemed like a pointless aim for rebellion: though that kind of death, bathed in the chants of starlight, must surely be better than the life we were leading, we had no wish to die. Besides, there were weans and other innocents among the Ironfolk families who had been brought on board; did we want their metal blood on our hands?

Scheming is as good as a log fire for keeping the body warm; that's really why we plotted such a lot.

I had a secret I talked about to none, not even the flass who then shared my bunk and my hopes – and whose name I have written out of my memories. She would never consciously have let the knowledge of my secret colour her thoughts, but others might have detected it nevertheless.



Buried in my meagre baggage was a tiny five-stringed harp. It had been crafted worlds away from where I had settled myself to live; its wood was of a mustard yellow unlike any I'd seen (although there are copses of it here on this world of mine). My mother gave it to me. The strings on it were not to my liking – the first thing I did was replace them with good twisted fishgut – but the frame was well enough constructed to sound a fine note. The whole instrument was barely bigger than my flattened pair of hands, and it could sustain only the simplest of melodies – certainly nothing of the complexity of even a Changing-spell – yet it made a pretty noise, a merry tinkle, like the sound early-morning mist makes on glass, which you can hear only if you listen carefully enough.

Why the Ironfolk guards should have let me keep it, I have no idea. They had searched through the few belongings they'd allowed us to bring with us – not once but twice or three times, hurling anything that looked in the slightest as if it could make music into one of their cruel shredding machines. (The tale was told that sometimes, for the sport of hearing screams, they did this also to Finefolk weans, but I believe it to have been only a story.) Perhaps they had never seen a harp so small, so that when they came across it in their rootling they thought it was something else. Maybe the Ironfolk have objects of quite different purpose that look like that. I have no knowledge. Whatever the truth was, I was not going to give them the instrument if they were too stupid to see it when it was in front of their eyes.

Not, I repeat, that it was in itself much good for anything. Even had it been a full clarsach – the most alive of all instruments – it would have been unable to play any living music in that vessel, surrounded as it was by crafted metal. It was a toy, and never anything more; here on the *Ten Per Cent Extra Free* it was just a way of reminding myself of the music I'd once played, when free to walk on worlds. There is a pleasure to be found in painful nostalgia; sometimes, when all slept but me, I plinked a lifeless note or two and tormented myself ecstatically. So softly did I pluck its fishgut strings that even the flass slenderly snoring beside me was unawakened.

But once an Ironfolk warder heard.

I have no inkling of why I didn't know he was coming. Normally we Finefolk knew where they were even as far as a league away, with their iron-nailed boots clanging echoes out of the loathed steel walkways. Perhaps I was thinking too much of the fact that we were nearing the time when the *Ten Per Cent Extra Free* would throw herself clear of the galaxy and set out across the gulf to the Spiral of Andromeda; that would be the moment when all of us knew our last farewells had truly been said to our homeworlds. Perhaps I was too engaged in my delightful misery to hear what my ears were trying to tell me. Or perhaps I was, secretly, eager to be discovered – as if the part of me that did not enjoy the pain wanted an end of it, and of the little instrument that conjured it.

The door to our cabin – mine and my flass's – was not of the sort that slid away like a horse's pizzle. Its crash against the painted aluminium wall as the warder threw it open returned me from wherever my sadness had blown me. I saw his eyes – his sightless Ironfolk eyes – bulge like a frog's when he saw what I was doing. In a second there was a heavy metal weapon in his hand – one of the spitting-weapons, that could be built light but are instead built heavy by the Ironfolk, to enhance their bullying demeanour. I sat on my bunk, half raised, staring over my slumbering flass not so much at the intruder but at the serpent-eye black of his weapon's nozzle. I could hear his muscles tense as he prepared to fire its dart, and I prepared myself for a final, soon-forgotten sting.

Which would have happened, except the scream of metal against metal had woken my flass. Just as the guard's finger stressed she raised herself up on her elbows, taking the dart in the centre of her forehead. At once the tiny metal point spread its evil cacophony all through her, and her body flailed its revulsion; the pain was too great for her to scream before she died, or even to try to sing the notes of the Dying-song.

I think the guard was too terrified to shoot at me after that. The lives of we slaves had not been expensive up until now, but the *Ten Per Cent Extra Free* was close to the time of leaving the galaxy, so hereafter our numbers could not be replenished simply by a raid or a trade. The Ironfolk forget that even their "harmless" trinket darts, loaded with synthetic stuffs that render Ironfolk themselves sleepy but not damaged, being tipped with metal are death to us.

He gestured with his spitting-weapon at me, and I made my eyes flare as if in fear of it. I curbed the grief I felt for my flass, although I vowed that one day in the Spiral of Andromeda I would find a place far from the crafted metal so I could sing for her her Dying-song in all its entirety. I picked myself off my bunk and moved away from her, as he had indicated. Another jerk of the weapon, and I threw my pitifully small harp towards him across the metal floor.

He crunched it underfoot, adding a second murder to his first; I heard its tiny scream as what little of the living music it had managed to hold fled from it.

Then we were walking along empty grey corridors, him at my back with his spitting-weapon still raised, as if there were somewhere I could escape to. And soon we were in a bigger room, and there were others – no other Finefolk, of course, for this was not a room where our kind would normally be expected to go, but instead an Ironfolk place. They were in clothes like my guard's, but some had coloured ribbons stitched to them, as if a cloud-blackened sky could be brightened by a paintbrush: the Ironfolk cannot see that dead colours are less brilliant than living ones. The one who had brought me here held out the dead fragments of my harplet, the regretted trophy of his kill; he jabbered spoken-words whose meaning I could not care to understand, for I was trying to hear the silence of the mustard-yellow

splinters in his hand.

One of the ones wearing dead ribbons beat me about the face with the heels of his hands, then clenched a fist to strike me harder – enraged, I think, that the blood coming from my nose was straw-yellow rather than a treacly red; but he was held back by a bark from another, and he dropped his arm to his side.

The beating had cleared my head; I made to thank my assailant, but was told curtly to hold my peace.

“We’ll have to make an example of it,” said the one who had spoken to my attacker and then to me. “Who knows how many others of the sluggies might be harbouring instruments, like this one? We can’t risk their starting to play the bloody things once we’re in fastspace.” He looked directly at me. “I’m sorry about that, buster.”

For a moment he seemed partly to be one of us. Confused, I fluted some notes at him, imitations of living song, but it was clear he knew nothing of them. Then I tried spoken-words, but he told me once more to be quiet.

“Kill it?” said another. “Something dramatic? Feed it into a recyc and show the mess on holo all over the ship? Stuff the thing out a lock?”

The one who seemed to be their leader shook his head, which is the Ironfolk signal of negation. “No. We’ll give it a pod. After we’ve left the galaxy.”

“But that’s ...” began the one who had slapped me.

“Cruel. Yes. But with the veneer of clemency. There will be no blood. If it were seen to be killed, that just might be enough to trigger the sluggies into rising against us: ten thousand sluggies is a lot. But that’s not the main worry. I’m more concerned with what the passengers might think.”

“Passengers – *huh!*” This was one of the others. He made as if to spit, but didn’t. “Bunch of no-hopers. Cattle. Can’t think why we don’t just flush *them* out of the locks. Save the cost of carrying them. No one would know.”

“Silence.” The leader next spoke almost silently himself, his crude Ironfolk words harsh with sibilants, like a weasel moving rapidly through dry grass. “Some of the passengers – many of them – feel sorry for the sluggies; and the kids take to them. Easy enough when you see them here on ship, like pretty children themselves; the passengers don’t know how they live on their homeworlds. The passengers don’t *know* they’re animals. The sluggies are too human. So we can’t hazard this thing’s death rousing sympathies in the wrong places. Yet we need to get the message through to its fellows. So we put it in a pod and send it off into space. Then we have an amnesty for a few days, so the sluggies can hand in any instruments they’ve managed to sneak aboard, or make.”

I learnt more as they continued to talk. The “pod” they had been speaking of was nothing to do with plants but instead like a lifeboat on a world-bound vessel; it was normally to be used for escape only when the main craft was certainly doomed. The *Ten Per Cent Extra Free*, like other large vessels, had thousands of these plastic pods. Because it was not

seen as practicable to give each of them all the machinery necessary to act as fully independent spacecraft (it never having occurred to the Ironfolk that the true way of making such things would be for each glad or flass to fashion their own, so it would sing in harmony with them), they were rigged with standard gear: moving wearily through rather than swiftly above the surface of the probability sea, a pod would head for the nearest sunlike star, and hope to find worlds there. At the same time, though, it would release a burst of high-pitched sounds which could flip along the crests of the waves, so other Ironfolk might hear the call for help. The cruelty of the leader’s punishment was that he planned to release the pod with me in it far out in the intergalactic ocean, with the nearest sunlike star many lifetimes’ journey away. All things would be reused inside the pod, so I would neither starve nor suffocate; I would merely live out my decades and die insane from loneliness, if I did not take my own life before.

It was a good Ironfolk plan, but the leader had forgotten that I and my kind were not Ironfolk. I could simply sleep out the millennia if I chose. Even if I could not have done so, most of us are poor at thinking of what is to come; the flasses and glads would see me go and wish me a good voyage, little thinking of the consequences facing me. They would dance that one of us at least had escaped from tyranny into freedom. They might be inspired to make instruments of their own, so as to be caught and rewarded as I had been.

I tried to explain this to the leader, but he would not hear.

“Next,” Qinefer is saying, “Brightjacket takes the grumbling sigh of a cloud that is lit by fires from beneath, and he lays the higher and the lower notes over the melody that wet wood makes in flames, and this he meshes into the rest of the glorious harmony he is constructing. But still, even after all this, he is not done; for no chord is complete without humour. He takes a blade of grass between his thumbs and blows on it, making a raucous fartlike blare; this he captures with his hands before it can flee, and he casts it into the harmony. Yet *still* he is not done ...”

She will carry on the account of Brightjacket’s making for a long while yet; the weans love to build the harmony in their minds, so they may hear it for themselves. She is inventive in this, never building the same chord from one telling of the tale to the next, and they joyously never correct her, as they might if she made some trifling other detail different. Yet she does not know the true harmony that opens up the pathways through the sea, for that is another memory I have failed to give her.

“Mummy,” says Harum at last, after Brightjacket’s chord has been made, “how do the ships of the Ironfolk sail the sea?”

It is not a question either of the weans have thought to ask before, and Qinefer glances at me, requesting that I explain; this is yet a further knowledge I have held to myself. I twitch my eyes,

refusing her request; my grin is required to mollify her.

Yes, she is inventive. The weans are satisfied by her explanation.

In the beginning there was only the probability sea, the nothingness where everything was waiting for something to happen. The eldern might say the event that happened was the mothering of the Finefolk, but that is not truth. We do not know why the featureless serenity of the ocean first churned, and perhaps it is impertinent of us even to speculate. But *something* touched its waters into motion, *something* sent waves rippling across it; so that, whereas before there had been nothingness, as all the probabilities were perfectly matched and balanced, now there were regional asymmetries – like temperature discretenesses in the waters of a worldly ocean. And, as with those variations, on occasion fluid nothingness was frozen into a more tangible beingness – a minuscule crystal of ice – a locus where the probabilities were restricted, so the future was no longer a choice from an *infinity* of potentials, merely from a great many potentials.

Probability was the living music.

Countless times a note of living music was instantly mated with a negation-of-living one, such that both vanished in their birthing of fresh nothingness, as if a spider devoured not only her mate but also herself; but this was not *always* the case. Sometimes the living notes escaped the seductions of their anti-living counterparts, and both remained solitary, unable to return to the formlessness of the once-tranquil sea. The living notes might sometimes then come together, growing just as tiny crystals of ice can grow out of brine to create something huge – a stately, lumbering ice-mountain. Not all did this; some were too fleet-moving, and for others the conditions in the sea around them were ... not *quite* favourable. And the same occurred for the pieces of frozen counter-music, of course; hugely large or infinitesimally small, they still pattern the surface of the probability ocean, seeking to mate with the living; in their different ways, both the Ironfolk and the Finefolk know this to be true, but knowledge of the truth has brought to neither of the kinds of folk any proper *understanding* of the life-negating counter-music.

The waters of the probability ocean are never still. They wash around the ice-bits remorselessly. Sometimes they melt away a piece; sometimes they bring some of the counter-music up close enough to the shore that much is reduced to water. But over everything there is a balance, so what is lost back into formlessness in one place emerges from it in another.

To the Ironfolk the pieces of frozen probability are something less wonderful: they are particles either of matter or of energy – for the Ironfolk do not realize, in their hearts, that energy is merely fleeter matter, singing the same song but more nimbly; and nor do the Ironfolk know that nothing in the probability ocean is truly disassociated from all else, so that nothing can be particulate. Yet even the Ironfolk have recognized, in a smallest way, the waves

on the waters. Where the pieces of living music are very tiny, the eddies around them are accordingly so; and they may build to become standing waves, as I have seen in fjords. These minuscule ripples, too, the Ironfolk call particles, even though they know they are not that but fluctuations on the surface of the probability sea.

In the gulfs between worlds the waves have a chance to grow much greater, so they are like those of inland seas. It was the discovery that they could make their craft flit from crest to crest of these that enabled the Ironfolk to travel so very rapidly among the stars; though they will never discover what the Finefolk have always known, that it is possible to create music in resonance with the waves of the particle sea – to pass through it instantly along uncluttered pathways.

As they skip the crests of the rollers between the stars, the Ironfolk's vessels cast up a great spray of droplets. Pieces of living music and counter-music are condensed from the waters, only to mate with each other and instantaneously vanish again. These pieces of stiffened probability may take many forms and magnitudes: most are only notes, mere crystals, smaller than a crystal of physical water could ever be, and too small to have a shape; others may be much larger, may be chords of a mountain's size, and their forms may be whatever the whim of chance decrees, from a fire-nostriled dragon to a cloud of light. But the Ironfolk are unaware of them, for these manifestations last no more than seconds, at the very most, before being negated by their dark counterparts; they might last longer were the Ironfolk astute enough to seek them, for the focus of a hearer's interest is another way of making music resonate with the ocean. But the Ironfolk, of course, don't think to do so.

The gulfs between the stars are as nothing to those between the galaxies. Here the waves, undisrupted by islands of frozen probability, can build up to become truly mighty rollers – as vast beside those that range between the stars as those are to the minuscule eddies about the nucleus of an atom. Here, too, the Ironfolk's vessels may move at their fastest speeds, for the distance between one crest and the next is so unimaginably greater. And their bows cast up an accordingly greater spray, whose droplets of music, much larger and more capable of coalescing like-to-like, can last for minutes or even hours. Here, because of their size, there is less variability in the forms of the pieces of frozen probability; most are too large to be anything but suns, or to sound as anything less than an inferno of chords.

The Ironfolk's intergalactic vessels leave behind them in the blackness of the probability ocean, all unknowing, trails of swiftly failing suns, like luminous pearls streaming from a broken necklace onto the surface of a worldly midnight sea, briefly floating before they sink from sight.

Like choirs, dying.

"They're arguing for a long time once finally Bright-jacket's harmony is struck. Who shall go to the Freedom first? The eldern are saying – not all of them,

for your Daddy is one of them who does not agree – that the one to take the pathway should be someone so old that he (they prefer it be a glad, as they are eldern) can remember a time before the Ironfolk came to plague us. The weans, on the other side, are plaintive that their youth gives them the right to go first to where all shall once again be young like they are; for, if you think about it, it is memory of a fixed place that gives us Finefolk our ages. Those of intervening years are ... well, you can imagine the kerfuffle: worse than you two at bath-time. In the end it is Brightjacket who resolves the dilemma, by the simple means of taking the first step himself.

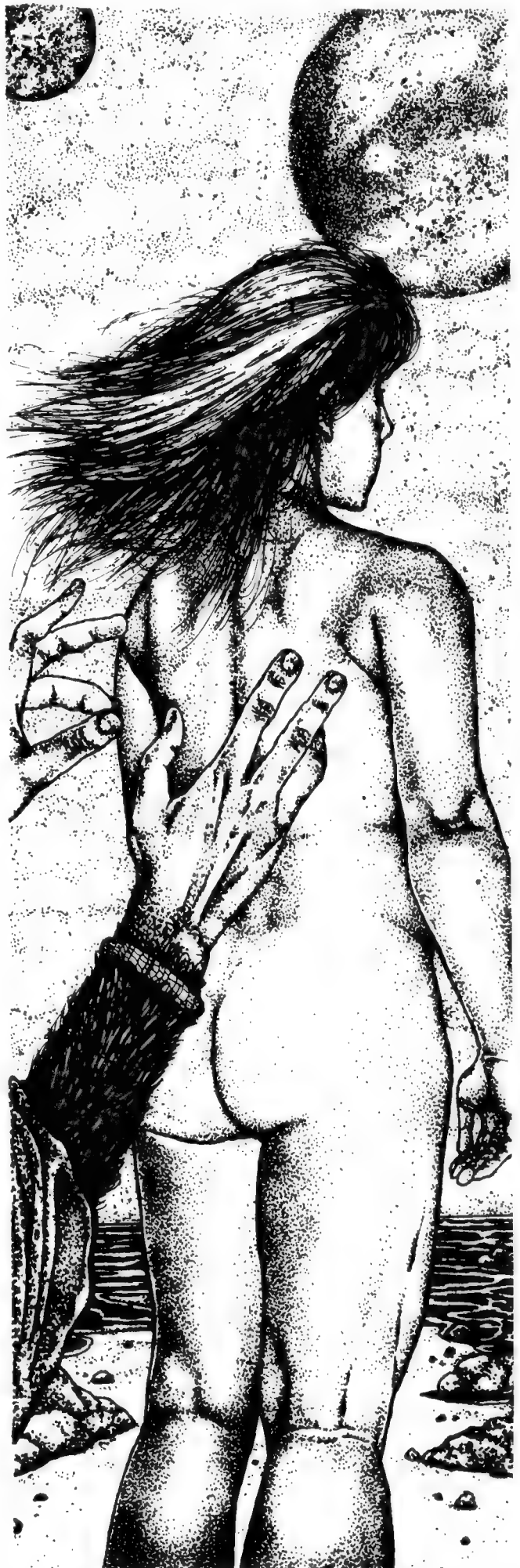
“There is a delay no longer than the beat of a mouse’s heart” – she draws the words out, taking the tip of her forefingers to her lips; her eyes are as wide as the weans’ – “and then the timbre of the Universe’s chant changes just a trifle, and all know that Brightjacket is alive and safe on the world he chose. As the Finefolk listen longer to the washing of the sea-waves, and to the new note he has added to their sound, they learn that Brightjacket is already constructing a further harmony, there on that new world of his, so that he may step yet further out into the ocean’s darkness.”

She describes it well. I can remember the hush that took the throng of us in the chamber at the core of Snowdon. Then there was singing and piping that made the air a splash of colours, like the sky at sunrise, mottled like a trout’s belly.

“By the time the Earth had turned once more on its axis, there were fewer than a hundred of the Finefolk left to know it. Those were the ones who wished to stay, who found the interest of watching the Ironfolk develop their unmusical arts outweighed the disgustingness of having to be so close to them in order to do so. For the rest, there was a Universe of worlds that offered welcome. Haven. Peace. The Freedom. Far from the stiffening curse of crafted metal, the Finefolk could become of one song with the worlds they ventured to, as they had been with Earth in the old days, before the Ironfolk’s arising.

“That is why, when the Ironfolk conquered the ocean crossings – they talk of conquest, not of befriending – and discovered so many worlds populated by Finefolk, blended in such that they might have been there forever, they thought of our kind as being not of Earth at all. We were, instead, relics of some long-forgotten race born elsewhere. We had, so the Ironfolk said, many millions of years ago travelled in now-long-rotted not-metal ships and been set down everywhere to colonize, but instead of doing so had regressed to become animals. As if the Ironfolk themselves were anything else! Never forget, Larksease and Harum, that you and me and your Daddy are animals, as much as any squid or starling, else you become like the Ironfolk, who think themselves other.”

I don’t know if what she says is true, although it has seemed so. I do not know if the Ironfolk truly believe us to be like animals, or if they just tell themselves we are, so it appears less of a sin to them they should slaughter or enslave us. They have a



code which they use in place of co-operation with the Universe. Often they use it to deceive themselves into believing they wish to perform good actions, when what they really wish is to destroy. I have seen Ironfolk condemn to the fire a hundred hundred or more innocents of their own sort – weans included – yet all the while telling themselves (or inventing gods to tell them so) that this is a kindly deed, and virtuous. Such crimes and worse have they performed against the Finefolk; I am sure their hands would more often have been stayed had they been able to know we are wiser than they.

It is to the Ironfolk's discredit, of course, that they would contemplate massacring animals of any kind in this way. I am trying to think with their mind; this causes me hurt, and may not be a revealing exercise.

I emerged from the *Ten Per Cent Extra Free* into light.

All around me the waters of the probability ocean were phosphorescent with the living music, sparked into being by the passage of the vessel. Brilliant runs of notes glissaded in and out of existence; chords clattered audaciously against the blackness, as if in the knowledge that their lives would be short, and so making sure their effulgence would compensate; here, there, everywhere were cadences that were both born and dying in an instant. The harmony of all this was bizarre, and for the first seconds after the pod crept from the belly of the *Ten Per Cent Extra Free* it seemed to me unutterably, intolerably discordant; yet almost at once I began to respond to it, recognizing it for the primal assonance of the Universe, and therefore the basic assonance of myself.

And there were suns – great rumbustious suns: yellow, like crashes of brazen trumpets; blue, like banks of zithers and oboes; white, like the high notes of an organ as the bass reeds trudge their heavy way beneath. I held my arms against the light, but my ears I did not block, for they revelled in the ever-fading songs.

One song I concentrated on, letting it fill me. With lips rubbery from nervousness and broken from the beating the Ironfolk had given me before consigning me to eternity, I lisped its tune. I eased my whole body into the melody, so that every cell of me was singing the particular song of a bright yellow sun. I could not truly sing the living music, for the pod had much of crafted metal in it; but I could let the living music be in me, for it was loud enough to be heard through the muffling metal webs.

Others of the suns died, but this one, after faltering momentarily, began to proclaim itself with renewed vigour to the Universe. I could also, through the pod's transparent front, see it now, less than a light-day away, a brilliant yellow spot against the fuzzy white backdrop of the galaxy, which was a slanting chant extending diagonally across a side of my field of view.

The pod's sluggish electronic sensors picked up my brightly singing sun – I felt them reacting beneath

my feet, like clumsy Ironfolk shambling around in a downstairs storey. Slowly the angle of the galaxy shifted, so it became almost horizontal ahead of me where I sat, still clamped into the single padded throne of the pod's bow. The little vessel's own sounds picked themselves up to a higher notch as it fixed its course.

But this I barely heard, for the song of my sun was throughout me; it *was* me. The *Ten Per Cent Extra Free* long gone behind me, all of the other suns it had created were now lost to silence; there was only the bright new music of the yellow sun and the supportive, distant monotone chanting of the galaxy's trillionfold voices.

How long I held the song I do not know. There was a time-telling device aboard the pod, and I scrutinized it some while afterwards, but my punishers had not thought to tell me how to read it. But I know I sang with the new sun until I sensed it no longer required me to do so, that henceforth it could carry the burden on its own. And even then I sang a while, too exhausted to cease. I slept several times – I was aware of that – yet it did not stop my singing.

Much later, once here, I tried to recreate that pure song in my mind, but it was lost – for the good, perhaps, for it was not my own song to sing, only to share, as I and Qinefer and Larksease and Harum share it now.

I had some years to watch my sun grow brighter as the pod slowly approached it. During this time I added harmonies to its melody, singing around it, above and below, weaving new things with it: I wove the playful counterpoint of a planet for it, and I dressed that planet in airy grace-notes. I made green sounds, rustling runs of notes for windblown grasslands. I burred bright streams and grumped great rivers. I sang birdsong – not the songs birds sing but the songs they are. I chuckled heavy animals stumbling through thick bushwork, hissed eels, belched toads and frogs, bellowed whales and breathed moths. I was like a glad lover choosing to clothe my love for the later joy of slowly discovering her nakedness.

I had no need to sing the song of my world's seas. Their song is born from that of the probability ocean.

And then at last I was there, the pod picking out the silvery mote that was my world and heading towards it. I heard all the songs I had sung being echoed back to me as I hung in orbit.

My world looked and sounded strikingly like the Earth from which Brightjacket had led us.

But without Ironfolk.

"What's it like," says Larksease to her mother, "travelling from world to world along Brightjacket's pathways?"

Qinefer doesn't know, of course – does not *really* know. This time when she looks to me for assistance I do not simply grin and leave her to it. I turn myself around on my haunches so that I'm facing my family. As always, I'm struck by Qinefer's beauty; I was wise, in the end, not to try to create her. Neither of the weans look in the slightest like either of us,

which is as it should be. I lean forward and kiss Larksease and Harum on their warm little foreheads.

"They're not Brightjacket's pathways," I say to Larksease with pretended severity. "Just because you hear a bird doesn't mean that it's your bird." Silently I make excuses to myself for myself: our sun is mine because I heard it, and so I am not telling a full truth to Larksease. "The pathways are the probability sea's. Brightjacket merely found how we could set ourselves in resonance with those freedoms of choice."

"Stop splitting hairs, Daddy," says Larksease. "Tell us what it's like."

I hum a short sequence of notes, then stop. I decided, once I came to my world, I would never repeat the harmony that Brightjacket found. This was to be all of the Universe to me. The stars I created in its skies were merely lights, touched onto the backdrop of the probability sea; the galaxy and the Spiral of Andromeda I blacked over – all other islands are too distant for my eyes to see. There is nothing in the sky that has been tainted by the Ironfolk's presence except perhaps the sun they long ago created through inadvertence; yet even it has surely been purified, made mine – become of Finefolk making. Certainly there must be pathways leading from here to the Ironfolk's Universe, but I do not wish to discover them. And, most certainly, I do not wish my flass or my weans to dance along them.

I resort to words. To light.

"When the harmony is complete," I say, "you find yourself amid glows of dark coral, as if you were burrowing deep among the petals of a rose with the sunlight shining through them. There is a hot darkness at the heart of the rose, and you rush towards it; the folds brushing you are hot and moistly briny, and you have to make some effort pushing yourself against them. And then, just before you reach the roasting heat of the rose's core, you are released to find yourself standing on the new world. Your whole body is alive with song, and you feel for moments as if the Universe had chosen you as the sole instrument through which it will play all of its many musics. That is what it is like to dance the pathways, my weans."

Qinefer is smiling, and looking away from me.

"Is it a *nice* singing?" asks Harum, his brow wrinkled.

"Yes," Qinefer replies gently before I can speak, surprising me. "But there are nicer ones – like the chorus of lemon juice on your tongue, or the whistling of..."

She stops speaking, and her eyes meet mine. All around us is the crashing noise of the probability ocean, dwarfing every other song. She shrugs, and the children follow the direction of her shoulders skywards, listening.

It is too easy to forget the grand, just because it is always there. It was my only companion for my first years on my world, and it was a long while before I wished for another. Everywhere was new to explore; while like Earth, this is *not* Earth. In my glee of

counterpoint as I'd approached my sun I had left much of the world as mere sketches; the sun itself, and the probability sea, had sung so many of the details. There are beasts undreamt-of by any worldly being – so strange I still can find no tunes to encompass them. There is one vast plant that gives birth to the clouds of the sky, and another that has the world's rivers for roots, flowing up from the shore and not down to it. There are types of tiny creatures made up only of descants of raw light; they flee shimmering from heavier beings that seem to be nothing but the smell of marsh-gas. How one can be the predator and the other the prey is something I have never learned, no matter how carefully I have listened.

It was not the total discovery of the secrets of my world that led me to yearn at last for someone beside me – no, not that at all, for I sense the world will never reveal its entirety to me. More it was the growing need to have someone beside me to share my unearthings, so I would not be singing each new song alone. I can recollect the moment now. I was running my fingers over the gleamy surface of a rock that had split on the heaving of the world beneath it, hearing it sigh the same music as oil on still water, yet hard-edged rather than soft-, and moving my mind to shape a chord in response, when I realized the emptiness of any chord I could create. The notes were all there, each in place and each of the right intensity, and yet the whole was incomplete; much as two strings can be plucked to produce an identical tone, so you cannot tell if one is sounding or both – and yet you *can*.

All potentials are present in the probability sea, of course; yet it is easier to spring some of them into stiffenedness than others. Photons are easiest of all, obviously; and, among greater structures, little prompting is required for the sea to produce suns. The various cadenzas I had to sing in order to build my world were many and collectively complicated, but at the heart of each there was simplicity: I had merely to set things in train, leaving the velleities of probability to shape the rest. But a person of the Finefolk – or even, for that matter, of the Ironfolk – is something else entirely: the mind that is capable of abstraction approaches in complexity the most perplexing of the living music.

Yet the yen burned on in me.

And there came the day when it must be requited.

I sat upon this very shore, with the sharp white sand abrading my buttocks and thighs caressingly, and stared out across the blue of the worldly sea – my worldly sea. I focused the spark of me until I heard nothing but the sound of its waves, of its deep waters straining against the sludge of its floor, and of its myriad creatures going oozy about their ways or springing all bright and silver-piercing briefly into the sunlight for splashy instants. There were other sea-songs, too: some dark and chillily weighty, some light like spume on the wind. I could not have counted all the songs, but I forced my mind to draw them together, making threads of them from which I could weave new patterns. The sun rose and

the sun set, but still my weaving went on; I was making a canvas of the sea-songs, setting them out as a tableau of sound, so that all of them could be seen there.

At last the task was done, yet that was only a part of the greater task. There was the shushing of the breeze-blown sand around me to be added to the tableau, and the aloof airs of the reeds, and the thunder of the sky's blue, and the pulse of a hunting cat, and the whipple of falling sycamore seeds, and all the other refrains of my living world. My mind hurt from the strain of keeping this throb of sound alive, and yet I did so; after thought, I realized the thrum of this mental pain was a part of what I needed also, and so I wove it in among the others, along with my own ragged breathing and the scent of my sweat. And the fleet crescendo of lightning. And the mewling of a gale in the next valley. And the squeak of sap in trees. And the ...

It was done when it was done: I did not have to decree that it was complete.

She walked down from the bladegrass-banks onto the beach. She was finely formed, a flass of such fairness that no glad could have looked upon her without his soul filling with yearning to taste her. My exhaustion fell scraping from my shoulders like a snake's sloughed skin. As she came towards me across the sand, her thighs licking together with the gentle touch of flames playing against a green log, I reached up my arms towards her, ready to embrace her ...

And let them fall again.

She, the encapsulation of all the songs I had drawn from the world and the sky above it, and even from my own self, had no song of her own: her soul was mute. She looked at me through eyes that were only eyes. Her perfection was entire – without a line wasted and without an essential line spared. I reached out a hand again, and saw its fingers run over the flawless skin of her belly; I saw and felt its immaculateness, but no song transmitted itself through those fingers from her flesh.

I said to her in spoken-word: "Welcome." It was the least I could do. Besides, my spirit was telling me that surely all my work had not been in vain, that surely it must be my observing rather than her lack which created an illusion of songlessness.

She said nothing, but just continued contemplating me. I could hear her thoughts, although I could not understand them. They were rational – even clever in a superficial way, just as the thoughts of the Ironfolk can be.

I darted a glance at her face again; at those empty eyes.

And recognized them.

Her thoughts were Ironfolk because that was what she was: songless, having failed to discover the harmony of the probability sea. It was something I could not give to her – the only thing I *had not given* to her, for I had woven all the rest of my own music into her. And so she was hollow, like the Ironfolk were.

I didn't know what to do with her. She was alive,

insofar as the Ironfolk are alive. My thoughts in discord: *I created her; I am responsible for her; it is not her fault she has been created; I cannot simply destroy her again ...*

"What's your name?" she said. It was an Ironfolk question. "Where's everyone else? Don't you get lonely, just sitting out here on the beach? Can't you take me to your house? The sun's too hot and bright; my skin is going to burn. This place stinks – all the seaweed, I guess."

And on. The sea turned from blue to grey, and the seaweed *did* start stinking. Five hundred paces inland there was a scream of protest as rocks not meant for building together were forced into a *wrong* assemblage. A grey cloud – a greasy, dirty, reluctant grey, not the grey of a dove's breast – tried to smother the sun. The sand was coarse and irritating against my skin.

The songs began to leach out of all the things in my world.

I killed her then, telling myself that she anyway had no life. I do not know if that was true or not but I lived long enough among the Ironfolk to learn some of the tricks they can play with their ethical codes; if I have continued to deceive myself in this, it is because I have never tried to unpick my self-created deception. The world-song I had created in order to spark her from the waves had not entirely fled from me; I was swiftly able to reassemble it and sing it again, without the flass's void at its core.

In a single tick of my heart she faded and was gone, healing the world.

"Are you going to finish the story?"

It is Larksease again. I have been silent for too long, and Qinefer has not desired to take up her thread.

"No," I say. "Not today. Not ever. The story of Brightjacket, and of how he led the Finefolk through the pathways to the stars – that story has no end, will never end. There is no finish to it. Your mother has told you that often enough, has she not?"

There is no finish to any of the stories and songs that make up the probability sea; Larksease and Harum will come to know that.

Harum plucks up to ask me the question he always asks me, if I am near when his mother is telling this tale. "Daddy, are *you* Brightjacket?"

And I smile as I always do, and scrabble my fingers through his hair, hearing the harmony of my flesh with his. "No, Harum, you know I am not. Listen to me and tell me if you can hear the name 'Brightjacket' in my song."

He goes through a pantomime of doing so, while his sister looks scornfully on him. She is older, after all – old enough to have forgotten when it was she asked me the same question.

"No," he says at last. "Your name isn't Brightjacket. It's... I don't know what it is."

"You will when you're bigger," says Qinefer, cuddling him to her.

He will not, for the probability sea, being *all* songs, has no name. I once had a name of my own,

but I traded it for Qinefer, unwittingly giving it (although I would have done it willingly) as part of the bargain I made with the probability sea.

For the sea heard my keening as the Ironfolk mermaid I had sung from my worldly ocean faded; it heard the discord of my grief.

Yet, in the infinitude of tune that is the probability sea there is no such thing as a clangour that cannot be made melodious – that cannot be complemented with another sound to make a harmonious wholeness. In that moment when I was open to the Universe, a broken instrument at its heart making a broken sound, the probability sea moved to make me entire again. It dissolved me back into itself, so that I was thinly scattered at once through all of the ocean; and then it reconstituted me in the instant of my dissolution – as it *had* to do, if it was to keep its own song entire – reconstituted me as a full chord, my broken discord matched with fresh notes such that the song my being sang

was the perfective part of the song of the ocean, and as such its whole.

I looked at the flass who was my completion, on this same beach these years ago, and her song told me its name was Qinefer. Side-harmonies would become called Larksease and Harum; those were their correct names. She and I may create further embellishments to the joyous chord we are, and they too shall doubtless have names.

But my own song no longer has a name, for it is that of the ocean.

John Grant has never appeared in *Interzone* before, although he has been very active as a writer and editor, in the sf field and elsewhere, for many years now. He was technical editor on *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (1993) and is co-editor, with John Clute, of the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (probably 1996). His real name is Paul Barnett, and he lives in Devon.

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From the Heart

Paul J. McAuley

There's a fundamental difference between American and British hard sf that's nicely illuminated by the way in which two recent novels explicate the role of humanity in the secret history of the universe. In Stephen Baxter's *Timelike Infinity* (reviewed in *Interzone* 93), men argue over the meaning of the deeds of gods, and creep like wary mice through the wreckage of ancient interstellar battlefields; in Gregory Benford's *Furious Gulf* (Gollancz, £15.99), gods argue over the meaning of the deeds of men, who wear their insignificance with defiance.

Furious Gulf is the fifth and penultimate volume in a series which has had a long and complex publishing history. The novel which preceded *Furious Gulf* appeared in 1989; the first volume, *In the Ocean of the Night*, published in 1977, was based on an earlier story, "Icarus Descending," from 1970; other volumes have also incorporated earlier, revised short stories. In *The Ocean of the Night* and its sequel, *Across the Sea of Suns*, detailed, through the adventures of its British astronaut hero, Nigel Walmsley, humanity's encounter with a widespread and highly advanced machine civilization intent on exterminating all organic life in the Galaxy. In the original version, Walmsley was left with a few survivors on a remote asteroid, bereft of hope but laughing defiantly at his fate. In later editions, Benford added a chapter that had the survivors storming the alien ship which destroyed their own, commandeering it, and setting course for the centre of the Galaxy. Which is where, some 70,000 years later, the second part of the series unfolds.

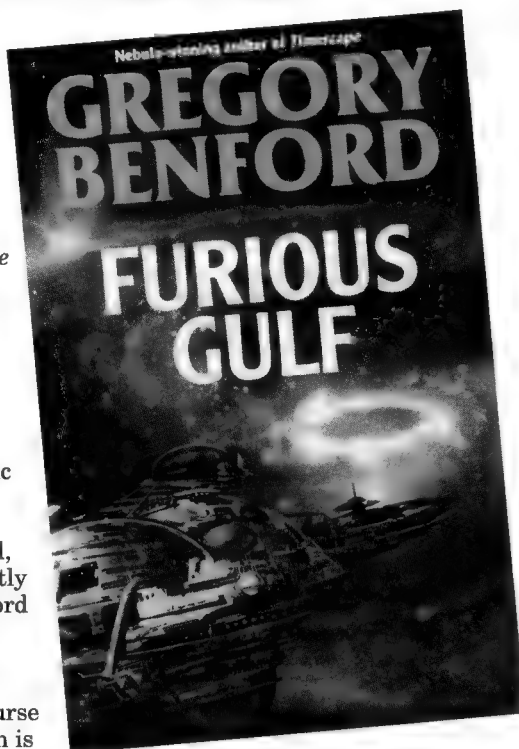
Humanity is scattered, hunted by inimical machines, the Mechs, and possesses only fragments of a once glorious technological civilization that reached its peak in the Chandelier era. The previous two volumes, *Tides of Light* and *Great Sky River*, described how the family Bishop, led by Killeen, fled their home world, gathered together scraps of other surviving families and forged an alliance with a race of cyborgs, who long ago incorporated human genetic material to produce questioning

Philosophs. For although humanity is a primitive, hunted race, it also possesses a vital curiosity born of doubt, which machine intelligence, coldly certain and unquestioning, lacks. It is this quality, and the message coded in the genes of Killeen's immediate family, which stay the final execution of the family Bishop by beings more powerful than they, as they plunge towards the black hole at the dead centre of the Galaxy, where Killeen's father may survive. There also appears to be a conspiracy, guided by unknown intelligence, which brings them near the black hole at the "aperture moment" when material

desperate plunge of the family Bishop's ancient spaceship towards the black hole, dogged by Mech killer spacecraft and aided by their ally's fantastic weapon, he reworks elements of space opera with tremendous élan.

The family Bishop reach a temporary haven in a strange habitat orbiting very close to the black hole. Killeen's son, Toby, who carries a simulacrum of Killeen's dead lover, Shibo, as an Aspect plugged into his nervous system, rebels when Killeen discovers that it might be possible to physically resurrect Shibo. The last part of the novel is a journey across lanes of condensed space-time, or esty, that recapitulates the family Bishop's flight from the Mechs in *Great Sky River* as a rite-of-passage for Toby. But although Benford's fevered, often stilted prose style, afflicted with an odd synesthesia, finds a suitable subject in the strange, dreamy flux landscapes of esty, Toby's goal, and his way of getting there, are only vaguely sketched. His journey is more picaresque than rite-of-passage, and its ending, when Toby meets a revenant from the past, has an air of contrivance born of the need to catapult us into the next, and final, volume.

Indeed, there's a curious dragging vagueness, despite the rigorous science and the bravura descriptions of physical phenomena, to the plot of this complex and ambitious novel. Its protagonists are passengers, and do not purposefully work towards a goal. The vital "essence" which elevates humanity above the mechs, which are superior in intelligence and development, would have been unconvincing even in earlier fictions founded on the All-American dictum of John W. Campbell that humanity must always be in some way superior to alien species (as opposed to the more revelatory and less assertive mode pioneered by Olaf Stapledon and championed by Arthur C. Clarke; at times, Benford appears to be trying to write a Stapledonian novel with Campbellian tools). Nor is the supposition that machine intelligence is incapable of doubt supported by modern theories of machine intelligence, based on Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, which



from a star, falling into the black hole, may open a door in the black hole's event horizon and unknown regions of space-time beyond.

Benford, a working physicist who is engaged in research into magnetic phenomena at the Galactic centre, brings a scientific rigour to his depiction of the strange astrophysical phenomena around the black hole, and he populates the Galactic centre with a dazzling abundance of life and imbues it with a strong sense of a deep and complex history. With the

suggests that artificial intelligences must necessarily be as uncertain as we are.

Furious Gulf is the second-to-last novel in a long series, and of course we should not yet expect complete revelation. We are left with a disorientating sense of not knowing at all where Benford is heading, but the consoling promise that we will not have to wait another five years to find out.

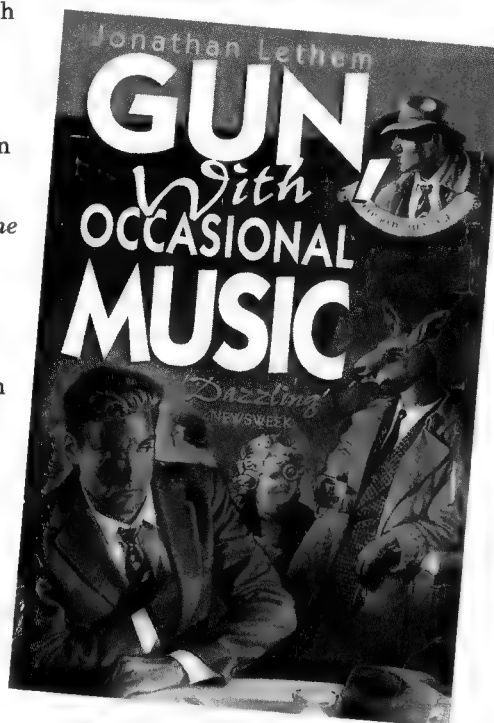
Let's move outwards from the centre of sf, lightly skipping across genres, a trick Jonathan Lethem's *Gun, with Occasional Music* (Tor, \$10.95; New English Library, £4.99) performs with brio. It is a beautifully constructed homage to those two Californian romantics, Raymond Chandler and Philip K. Dick, blended from their common theme of the Last Good Man in a rotten system, and spiced with knowing outtakes from noir fictions ranging from Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* to the movie *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*?

Conrad Metcalf, the protagonist and narrator, is a hardboiled and cynical private eye struggling (like Chandler's Philip Marlowe) to retain his integrity in a dystopian future where integrity is considered a weakness and society has been atomized. Like Dick, Lethem satirizes sf tropes to point up contemporary mores. The state dispenses amnesiac drugs; television is banned; news consists of musical interpretations, or wordless photomontages in newspapers; there's a new underclass of animals raised to intelligence by evolution therapy; social standing is measured in karma stored in the magnetic strips of credit cards, and Inquisitors (Metcalf was once one) dispense justice by shaving off karma points. Metcalf has just quit a case because the client wanted his wife roughed up; now that client is dead, and gangling innocent Orton Angwine, framed for the murder, has had his karma wiped clean and is destined to be frozen and reborn into the future. Angwine wants Metcalf to clear him, and soon Metcalf finds himself plunged into a complex web of deceit and corruption, with all strands running to Phoneblum, an overweight gangster whose menacing omnipresence echoes that of Hammett's Fat Man in the *The Maltese Falcon*.

Metcalf's narrative voice, ever ready with the sarcastic quip, perfectly captures the wry, weary voice of the *noir* detective. Phoneblum's strongarm guy is an evolved kangaroo that desperately wants to prove itself yet always finds itself outsmarted: "I probably had intelligence and experience on him," Metcalf says, "but in a fight with a

kangaroo I'll take surprise, thanks," and later tells Phoneblum, "You sent a kangaroo to do a man's work." Yet it is a voice that also commentates on its own act; Metcalf knows that his routines are what keeps him human, and that his own inquisitiveness is cross-grained with his world: "What's missing that used to be commonplace is a sense of connectedness in people's lives. In my line of work that's old news."

Metcalf eventually does pay the price of presuming to make connections, but turns his fall from grace to his advantage to find



redemption, if not for society, then at least for himself. It is a bitter-sweet ending in a perfectly controlled pastiche that, smart and sharp and invested with a surreal humour, finds its own strong new voice in the blend of two genres. It is a delight.

Norman Spinrad's *Pictures at Eleven* (Bantam, \$12.95) is a fast-moving, tightly plotted polemical thriller that, like his earlier sf novel, *Bug Jack Barron*, vigorously parodies the worst excesses of TV news. An eco-terrorist group, the Green Army Commandos, take over a small TV station in Los Angeles to wage a propaganda war against nuclear desalination plants. They are more successful than they dare hope, and escalate their demands while under siege by the LAPD and the CIA, the rest of the news media, and Hollywood agents who want to sell their story. Spinrad depicts the seduction of the idealistic ecowarriors, who walk like lambs into the maw of the media ("We're terrorists, not TV talk show hosts," one protests, to no avail – later, each

of them will have a spot on a meet-the-terrorist show that sarcastically deepens a similar idea in the movie *Network*), with sharp and ironic wit, framing a clear moral debate on the use of force to achieve good in a democracy where debate is undermined by spindoctors and instapolls. With a portrayal of the interaction between the terrorists and the newstaff that is sympathetic and unclined, and an ending that is both genuinely poignant and believable, this is a novel that informs the head and moves the heart.

Two collections. Like Benford, Charles Sheffield is a professional scientist, and the stories brought together in *Georgia on My Mind and Other Places* (Tor, \$21.95) are illuminated by his inexhaustible sense of curiosity about the workings of the world, ranging wide from historical through contemporary settings to the far future. These tales are told from the heartland of sf, and while their furniture may be somewhat battered by previous usage, the science that drives their plots is impeccable. Sheffield knows that the more we learn of the world, the more we learn of ourselves, and his best stories, such as "The Feynman Saltation," "Deep Safari," or "Georgia on my Mind" (a deeply felt and uplifting excavation of a lost scientific achievement: it won the Nebula Award), are structured as scientific mysteries whose resolutions echo the enlightenment of their protagonists.

Blue Motel (Little, Brown, £16.99) the third of the *Narrow Houses* original anthologies, edited by Peter Crowther, showcases an eclectic range of new and established horror, fantasy and science-fiction writers. Ian McDonald's "Blue Motel" is a hectic, smartass homage to the later movies of Alfred Hitchcock with a genuine *frisson* in its last line; in Kathleen Ann Goonan's "Susannah and the Snowbears," scientists fleeing from a strongly realized dystopia encounter time-bending beings; Ursula Le Guin contributes another in her new series of Hainish short stories, a powerful meditation on the abuse of personal and political power set on a world of newly liberated slaves; in "The Pond," Bentley Little contributes a haunting meditation on loss of youthful idealism; Michael Moorcock's "The White Pirate" is a rich, postmodern Arabian Nights fantasy set in an alternative 1920s Mediterranean. The series' original theme of fictional exploration of superstitions is beginning to be stretched thin, but there are enough nuggets to suggest that short stories remain a vital arena within genre writing.

Paul J. McAuley

A Sequel by Any Other Hand

Brian Stableford

Publishers love sequels, and who can blame them? Marketing a product is so much easier when there's a convenient hook to hang it on, all the more so if the hook in question has already proved its merit as a reader-trap, and publishing – unlike writing – is a form of entrepreneurial activity. The most successful books nowadays are those which are spun off from more pervasive media, whether they relate to such “real life” soaps as the royal family or to Hollywood products which wear their trademark symbols as badges of pride; books of this kind operate in a context where *everything* is a sequel, the parent enterprises being planned and extrapolated by committees which are untroubled by the myriad inconveniences of individual authorship.

Star Trek: Federation by Judith & Garfield Reeves-Stevens (Pocket Books, \$22) and *Star Wars: Children of the Jedi* by Barbara Hambly (Bantam, \$21.95) are the latest elements in long-running series which are formulated segmentally (as tapeworms are), with each individual unit faithfully replicating the properties of a basic template. The promulgators of both series can afford to hire top-class writers, and they presumably pay enough to make it worth the authors' while to do their homework very thoroughly indeed, so it is no surprise to find that both of these novels are cleverly structured, with plots and counterplots which fairly race along, and that they are composed with consummate craftsmanship, if not with feeling.

Such faults as these series have are endemic and ruthlessly persistent, descending upon the poor authors with the neutronium-like weight of precedent and tradition. It would be ridiculous to blame Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens for the fact that Mr Spock still hasn't the faintest inkling of what the word “logical” actually means, or the fact that James T. Kirk's poker tactics are mind-bogglingly imbecilic. It would be equally ridiculous to blame Barbara Hambly for the fact that all her leading characters have been untimely ripped from a womb stocked with comic book imagery, or the fact that the only lever given to her for the purposes of plot-movement is an

all-purpose *deus ex machina* which has not even the saving grace of moving in mysterious ways.

The strange upshot of the system which produces these books is that no matter how well the novels are done they remain essentially silly. *Federation*, like the current film release *Generations*, is a link-exercise which bridges the gap between the original *Star Trek* cast and that of the first spinoff series, and it does so in a manner which is not merely ingenious but almost graceful. The *Star Trek* prospectus is one which does not encourage, but does at least permit a measure of science-fictional conscientiousness in the orchestration of its narratives, so there is some real narrative tension in the way that the three narrative strands of *Federation* run headlong to their meeting and then intertwine. There is even a certain propriety in the way that the two main plots, like the two supposedly-charismatic starships, use a slingshot effect to accelerate into and out of their climactic near miss. Unfortunately, as every *Star Trek* enthusiast knows, the plot is *not* the thing; it is merely a skeleton on which to hang the excruciatingly sentimental celebration of the supposedly heroic qualities of a cast of characters who are, at bottom, ham actors unsupported in their script-life by any authentic intelligence, wit or integrity. The Reeves-Stevenses, perhaps wisely, accept this straitjacket wholeheartedly, piling ham upon ham with an apparent sincerity which Barbara Hambly – working within a framework which flatly rules out *any* effective enterprise – cannot in the end contrive to feign. *Children of the Jedi* bounces along merrily enough while it is all action, but when the time comes to sweeten the dish by having Luke Skywalker fall in love with the disincarnate heroine her nerve falters – as well it might, considering that the narrative move which ultimately reunites them is a moral as well as a narrative atrocity.

Writers who have the temerity to write sequels to famous literary works by long-dead authors run the risk of being accused of robbing graves and attempting to boost their

reputations by association, but they do have certain advantages which the authors of *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* novels do not. They do not inherit the accumulated follies of overabundant precedent, nor are they compelled to avoid inconveniencing the legions who might come after them. They have the opportunity to build whatever imaginary edifice they please upon foundation-stones they have chosen for themselves. It is, therefore, very disappointing to find that Hilary Bailey's *Frankenstein's Bride* (Simon & Schuster, 12.99) is a shabby object which must be reckoned an insult to Mary Shelley's original.

As an extrapolation of the central theme of *Frankenstein* – i.e., Mary Shelley's meditation on the ways in which humanity can be perverted, aborted or tragically frustrated – *Frankenstein's Bride* is a hopeless non-starter which cannot hold a candle to Michael Bishop's brilliant *Brittle Innings* (1994). Even if it is considered simply as sly feminist gloss on the assumptions about sexuality implicit in all 19th century thought and literature it is but a pale shadow of Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992). Given the author's seemingly conscientious attempt at stylistic pastiche it is surely astonishing that she should choose to reduce Mary Shelley's interestingly articulate monster to the kind of grunting grotesque favoured in bad Hollywood films. The female monster's dumbness is eventually revealed to be a sham, encouraged by abusive male incomprehension of her nature and feelings, and it is not entirely clear what kind of moral can be drawn from her eventual voluntary reversion to capering cretinism.

In spite of the intrinsic limitations and pitfalls bedevilling the exercise, it is possible for contemporary writers to take up the imaginative themes of the monuments of fantastic literature and run with them. As *Brittle Innings* brings the accumulated wisdom of the intervening 175 years to a careful reconsideration of the central motif of *Frankenstein*, so Stephen Baxter's *The Time Ships* (HarperCollins, £15.99) brings the legacy of exactly 100 years of scientific discovery to a scrupulous reconsideration of the vaulting ambition of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine*. Like Mary Shelley before him, Wells displayed in his first full-length work a boldness which he never recovered; nothing else he wrote ventures anywhere near as far afield as *The Time Machine*. Unlike *Star Trek*, which continually boasts that it is going “where no one/man has gone before” although it is bound by its inherent limitations to go *exactly* where it has gone before

and nowhere else, *The Time Machine* really did venture into imaginative *terra incognita*, opening up that territory for a legion of later writers whose exploits produced increasingly detailed maps.

The Time Ships sets out, as boldly and as conscientiously as its author can contrive, to take in the full extent of the imaginative territory which is now available to Wells' heirs. It is ingenious in taking aboard the various infelicities which arose because Wells' work was rooted in the imperfect science of its day, and is deftly polite in rooting its own far more elaborate version of multiple alternative histories in other Wellsian visions. It shows us the far futures made imaginable by contemporary science, and it examines the philosophical framework in which its scientific ideas are set. It combines determined fidelity to rational plausibility with visionary extravagance, achieving a coherence of the two which has rarely been matched even by the finest writers of hard science fiction, and it does so with a literary elegance which none but a mere handful of its predecessors has equalled.

Stephen Baxter really does stand on the shoulders of giants in order to see further than they did and to push the horizons of the imagination back as far as they can now be pushed; he is not simply taking advantage of a comfortable place to ride. *The Time Ships* is a brilliant piece of work because it can not only stand comparison with the landmark works of visionary scientific romance (which include, of course, E. V. Odle's *The Clockwork Man*, Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker* and Arthur C. Clarke's *The City and the Stars* as well as *The Time Machine*) but also carries forward the ambition and the scope which these works entertained. It is a sequel in the best possible sense – which is to say that it is the fruitful continuation of a collective enterprise which, by its very nature, can never be completed.

The above-named sequence of works, which comprises the tradition of visionary scientific romance, is a genuine collaboration between authors whose individual contributions are in no way diminished by their reliance on precedents or by the eventual supersession of their visions. This tradition is an authentically scientific endeavour as well as a literary endeavour, and its produce is enlightenment. Stephen Baxter has every reason to be proud of having established the most recent benchmark within this unfolding tradition, and his readers have every reason to be grateful that he has done so.

Brian Stableford

Peeping Toms and Weirdmongers

Magazine Reviews

Paul Beardsley

Peeping Tom (£2.10 per issue, £7.50 for 4) edited by Stuart Hughes and Conrad Williams. Cheques payable to *Peeping Tom*. Available from publisher David Bell at Yew Tree House, 15 Nottingham Road, Ashby de la Zouch, Leics. LE65 1DJ.

In *Interzone* 82, John Duffield achieved notoriety in this column when he withheld the address of *Peeping Tom*, the horror magazine he was reviewing. According to the editorial in the latest *Peeping Tom*, this has actually resulted in increased sales. I must admit, never having seen the magazine myself, I was quite keen to see what the fuss was about...

Issue 16 has 52 A4 pages, a brown card cover with a jokey Lovecraft/Poe picture on the front by Dallas Goffin, a story illustration on the back by Dreyfus, and interior artwork by Liam Kemp, Debs Dumbrell and Pete Queally. It kicks off with a silly story by Michael Marshall Smith about people turning into domestic appliances; not representative of the author at his best. That's followed by "The Rabbit," supposedly made up by Jack Pavey, but what really happened is this: Pavey took a fairly well-known joke, expanded it a bit, added some gore, and attempted to pass it off as his own.

In Andy Cox's "Haggis (Scotland)" a wife, brutally abused by her husband, has to make a haggis for Burns Night. But she's forgotten to buy the vital ingredients (ie the liver). So what do you suppose she does? This highlights a problem with *Peeping Tom*, or at least with this issue. Seeing as how the stories usually end in a (sometimes literal) bloodbath, surprises are thin on the ground. In Tim Lebbon's "First Taste," for instance, the narrator describes what we are supposed to think is his first sexual experience. But only someone completely unfamiliar with horror fiction could fail to guess what's really

happening. Yet there's no impression that the magazine is intended for newcomers. Of the remaining four stories by Allen Ashley, Rick Cadger, John Dunne and Dallas Goffin, two are not centred around gore.

D. F. Lewis' **The Weirdmonger's Tale** (\$3.50, 56pp) published by Wyrdd Press, available from Rosewood Cottage, Langtoft, Driffeld, East Yorkshire, YO25 0TQ.

Readers familiar with, but bewildered by, the work of D. F. Lewis may find a degree of enlightenment in *The Weirdmonger's Tale*. It's a chapbook (ie it looks like an A5 small-press mag) illustrated by Camille Gabrielle, whose artwork is textured in a manner reminiscent of wood-grain and lugworm-casts – which is to say, ideally suited. On reading the autobiographical Preface (a fascinating and evocative piece in its own right), one learns not to worry too much about finding a coherent narrative, though sometimes that is forthcoming. With Lewis, it is not essential to understand in order to enjoy.

There are ten pieces in all, most of which are pretty well indescribable. "A Long Tail," for instance, features suicide by prayer-beads; it's absurd, and funny, yet it encapsulates the despair and the breakdown of communication inherent in the act more successfully than one would expect from a direct approach. Then there's "Numbskull," set in a misshapen house with dimensionally transcendental attics, and a tongueless inhabitant Matilda who enjoys French-kissing. "Spam" sees the reappearance of Lewis' familiar character Blasphemy Fitzworth, in a not-exactly-parallel-world where they import living human heads, and build churches across rivers – and, just as it's beginning to look overly contrived, one character affords us a horrifying glimpse into our own world: "They spoke of days to come when

everybody would stare at a thing called 'Snooker' for days on end from a glowing square of colour in the corner of the parlour, in apparent enjoyment."

Some of these are as funny and as quotable as Pratchett or Adams, without resembling either in the least; the dying gasp of a tramp, for instance, is likened to that of "a tooth-fairy stifling under a little girl's pillow." Some are genuinely surreal, recalling the bizarre perspectives and baseless-but-real fears of childhood. Others pack time-paradox and laugh-(as opposed to groan-) inducing puns into less than 300 words ("Spilt Milk"). It's an acquired taste, and it's only fair to say that these are going to work for some people and not for others. But that's probably the case with anything original.

The Third Alternative (£2.50 per issue, £9 for 4, Quarterly, A5, 52pp) and **Zene** (1.95 per issue, £7 for 4, Quarterly, A5, 36pp) edited by Andy Cox, 5 Martins Lane, Witcham, Ely, Cambs CB6 2LB

Issue 4 of *The Third Alternative* features Allen Ashley's "The Thin Man's Guide to Slipstream," a frankly hilarious, gentle-but-firm send-up of the affectedness of certain authors who have written for this and similar publications. (They know darned well who they are.) And while it would be unfair to describe past issues as pofaced, the humour in this one, self-directed or otherwise, is timely. Two stories likely to raise a smile are the reliable Rhys H. Hughes' "The End of the Road," which reads like a spoof allegory with wicked puns, and Don Webb's gem "Other: Please Explain," a delightful account of an underground lifestyle that crams a neat idea and some great imagery into its short length.

Steve Antczak successfully sets out to "Break Down the Walls of the World" by forcing perpetrators and victims to swap roles. But Brian Howell carefully downplays any sense of wonder in his sf story, "In," which reads like a naff derivative of *Fahrenheit 451*: the environment is wrecked, and the government makes things illegal for no better reason than to remind the reader that governments are nasty. Paul Pinn's "Thrid and Shift" is too hard-going to be really enjoyable; it seems to think it's an off-beat offshoot of sf, but really it's just straight sf with something missing.

In fact, most of the fiction is quite conventional throughout this issue. Nothing wrong with that, of course, because in most cases the quality is of the high standard one should expect of this magazine. Judging by the letter writers, though, you'd think fantasy stories centred around people

had just been invented. On the other hand, Ben Mitchell showcases three independent pieces of artwork which are decidedly not conventional. Most disturbing of the three is the baby on the cover – he looks so streetwise, you'd swear he carries a switchblade in his nappy.

With some accessible poetry, and more good fiction by Lawrence Dyer, Kimberley Padgett-Clarke and others, this is another very good issue, and it's still keeping to a regular schedule. I'll be resubscribing.

Andy Cox's other magazine, *Zene*, is in its second issue. It's the best way of knowing what's going on in the small press and it's a good read to boot. Containing contributor's guidelines for numerous magazines, reviews, opinions, and useful advice on writers' groups, biosquibs, dolphin-winnowing and much else, it's more indispensable than this column.

Auguries: The Magazine of Science Fiction, Fantasy & Psychological Horror (£3.50 per issue, £7 for 2, A5/Digest, 94pp; Review supplement 50p, but free to subscribers) edited by Nik Morton. Cheques payable to Morton Publishing, PO Box 23, Gosport, Hants, PO12 2XD

Auguries is back from the dead and looking better than ever. Issue 18 has a glossy colour cover, lots of pages, and good illustrations by the likes of Paul Cockburn, Pete Queally and the Morgan brothers, Roger and Russell. Issue 18 is the "Love" special, which is a rather better choice of theme than the "Green" issues of a few years back. (See review, *Interzone* 55.) For one thing, there's more scope for variety. For another, people are generally less ignorant about love.

There is indeed a good deal of variety in this selection, ranging from romantic fantasy ("Moon Kissed" by Mark James Pritchard) to grim science fiction ("The Dross on Aaron Four" by John Townsend). The standard of writing and storytelling is pretty good throughout, the best story being the last; "Irina" by David Hast is a poignant, well-realized tale of lost possibilities, a ghost story using the vocabulary of parallel worlds.

Auguries, it has often been said, has its own house style. It's a nice magazine, for better or for worse, and rarely skates on the genre edges. For all that, it does not avoid harrowing subject-matter. William Nicholson, in "Give In to Love," takes us to Sarajevo, and we learn that, even here, love conquers all; in Deborah Beard's "A World Full of Strangers," which is about Alzheimer's, we're told, sorry, it really doesn't.

Paul Beardsley

From Caliban to Merlin

Chris Gilmore

The idea of revisiting a classic tale from the viewpoint of the villain has been used often and effectively: examples include *Flashman*, *Grendel* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Tad Williams has now tried the same sort of trick in *Caliban's Hour* (Legend, £12.99). It's a short book with large type (and so many blank pages that I wonder what special terms may be found in the author's contract) and its plot is exceedingly simple.

Twenty years after the events recounted in *The Tempest* Caliban escapes from the island. Intent on revenge against Prospero he makes his way to Naples and asks directions of a drunken sailor, who can barely understand him, so thick and uncouth is his Milanese dialect. The news is bad: Prospero has been dead five years. Undaunted, Caliban climbs into Miranda's bedroom (Ferdinand being conveniently absent) to kill her instead. What a vile person! I hear you say, especially when as prologue to the fell deed he sets about some mental torture. This consists of telling her the story of his life which, at well over a hundred pages, forms the bulk of the book.

By this time alarm bells were ringing throughout my cortex. Caliban switches from barely comprehensible to the spacious style of the more literary sort of Victorian adventure yarn (Williams does a good R.L. Stevenson), and his tone suggests that he wishes to arouse sympathy rather than terror. What has become of the uncouth beast? Is he a crazy, mixed-up kid, a silly, twisted boy or a bit of both? Will Miranda sort him out sufficiently to escape death at his hands? Except that these are not the real foci of interest at all; in particular he never seems at all likely to kill Miranda, and his repeated reminders that her time has come sound more hollow each time.

This is an intensely literary work, and its effect depends on the reader's awareness that in the play the

relationship between Caliban, Prospero and Miranda pivots on Prospero's allegation that Caliban had attempted to rape Miranda with the explicit intention of getting her pregnant. Not altogether surprisingly, Caliban's version is different: his 'attempt' had been the not wholly unasked-for approach of one virginal adolescent to another, rendered more poignant by his total ignorance of how the business should be conducted in its physical aspect, never mind the moral or emotional. It is also extremely stylised; in the course of such a prolonged harangue, Caliban can hardly fail to raise points which Miranda is well placed to answer, but she is not allowed to – Caliban shushes her, just as Browning has Fra Lippo Lippi and Bishop Blougram shush their voiceless interlocutors in his dramatic monologues.

The problem with this approach is that the Unreliable Witness is invoked but never put to proper use, which falsifies Caliban's position; that Prospero has used him is hardly to be denied, but he has also taught him much – not least to speak, as is now doing with such facility. Caliban is typically ungrateful, putting me in mind of the lines John Fuller gave him:

O then unteach me language,
let the cool
Sea sidle up and draw me to
its deep
Silence. Teach me how to
break the rule.

And Ariel's answer:

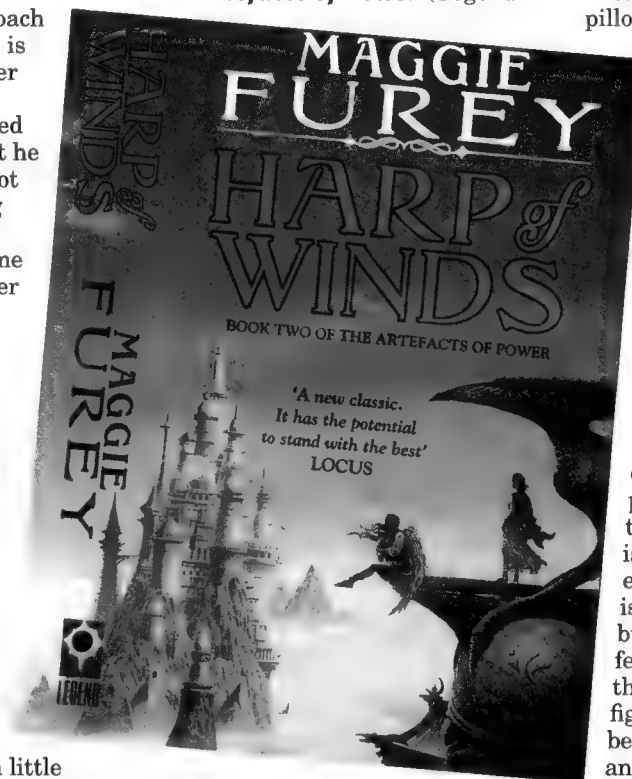
Once in the game you cannot
make that leap.
The sea will cast you up
again if you
Pretend to break the rule
you really keep.

Moreover, when an old man, a little girl and a heavily built boy live together, common sense demands that the boy should take on much of the labour. Caliban assumes the role of the persecuted autochthon, so that much of the pathos with which Williams seeks to invest him drowns in the blatantly self-serving aspects of his discourse, producing the same moral vacuum which condemns *A Passage to India* – well, almost! Williams has none of Forster's preciousness, and in the coda rescues himself rather neatly. Moreover, one should not load such a slight piece with pretensions to which it lays no claim.

Even so, it has to be said that the question of Caliban's maturity – old age, indeed – has been addressed before, and very much more

convincingly, by Poul Anderson in *A Midsummer Tempest*. It's only a side-issue in that book, but if you only have time for one, that's the one to go for. Ideally, you should then read *Caliban's Hour*, for its own virtues as a late twentieth-century imitation of a Victorian pastiche on a Jacobean original, but mainly for contrast. Finally, John Fuller's delightful 'A Dialogue between Caliban & Ariel' is to be found in his collection *Fairground Music* – and that Shakespeare feller wasn't bad either.

Commenting on Maggie Furey's Aurian in *Interzone* #90, I remarked that the succeeding volumes might well improve once the crudity of the initial construction receded from the reader's mind. On reflection, I think I was being optimistic. The sequel, *Harp of Winds: Book two of the Artefacts of Power* (Legend



£5.99) has many predictable virtues: she keeps a lot of balls in the air without losing track; she is never short of colour, action or suspense; there's more variety of locale than you find in most S&S; and the sense that all the disparate elements will come together in due course is never absent. Having come some distance from the jerry-built foundations which rather blighted the first volume, this one seems more solidly constructed; yet the metaphor which constantly recurred was not that, but 'coarsely woven'.

The trouble is twofold. The locales and their inhabitants are varied, and interesting in themselves, but there are far too many of them, too close together, and at the same time too ignorant of each other, for credibility.

Even Forral, now deceased and on intimate terms with Death, can't see very much from his astral vantage. Aurian, her scattered companions, her mother, her enemies and other, newly introduced characters contend on the physical and magical planes in varying degrees of confusion about what is going on, with an effect rather as if Tolkien had decided to make *The Two Towers* half again as long and three times as complicated before starting on *The Return of the King*. As the time-scale is short (Aurian is already noticeably pregnant as the book opens, and doesn't reach term until page 332) much of the action has very doubtful relevance to the main plot.

This partially disguises, but does nothing to cure, that plot's fundamental weakness, which lies in the character of Miathan, the evil Archmage. Miathan is a complete pillock; having started with all the advantages in the first book, his every effort has been cack-handed, and he shows no potential for learning from anything or anyone, least of all his own mistakes. By now he's down to his last powerful ally, the weather-mage Eliseth, whom he has already so terrorised that she intends to do for him as soon as it's safe. My own bet is that she'll succeed in the next volume, but probably die in the process.

That brings us to the second problem with this book: it's as conventional in style as it's predictable in development. By that I don't mean that the writing is positively bad – as I've remarked elsewhere, the level of mediocrity is very high in this crowded field – but at best it has a second-hand feel to it. There are occasions when this is really unavoidable, as in the fight scenes, all of which might have been lifted from David Gemmell, and the tavern scenes, which owe just as much to Fritz Lieber, but at other times one gets the impression that Furey was tapping the keys on automatic. It is not good enough to let in such abominable fustian as 'steaming beverage' for a cup of the local tea, and that is far from the worst:

Pacing back across the stony floor of the cave, Anvar raged against his helplessness. Gods, if only I could help them, he thought.

Quite.

To perpetrate such bathos the first time shows haste rather than incompetence; but to let it survive into the printed version suggests a fundamental lack of interest on the part of author and publisher alike – which raises an obvious question:

How can they expect the public to pay good money to read a book which they are so loath to re-read themselves?

It's entirely symptomatic that, although Furey entitled each chapter, there's no contents page. To prepare one would have meant going through the MS, noting each title and *taking it down*. Then, at the proof stage, it would be necessary to write in the page numbers – too much like hard work!

Coincidentally, Millennium has made the same omission from Adam Nichols's *The War of the Lords Veil* (£15.99 hb); perhaps they think it's the modern way. If they're right, so much the worse for modernity. This is another first novel, described as 'a sword-and-sorcery treat' – if you like your treats bleak, I'm inclined to add, for the blurb sells it short; this is heroic fantasy in the least escapist mode. The theme is suffering, and the effects of suffering on the human spirit. A few are ennobled by it, finding that it calls forth capabilities that happier times might never have aroused: most are degraded, as the social veneer is stripped to disclose the brutality and venality beneath; when they obtain the means to inflict suffering in their turn, very few reject the opportunity. To bring out all the aspects, Nichols tells his tale from a number of contrasting viewpoints.

The Lords Veil of the title, having invaded their primitive northern neighbours, are engaged in ravaging the countryside, torching the villages and imprisoning the people in concentration camps. Why? Well, it passes the time, and the Lords' principal joy is to contemplate the misfortunes of others. They also enjoy lying, without regard for credibility; in their army the locals are referred to as 'rebels', though they have never been under the Lords' sway. To maximise the general wretchedness, they have equipped their troops with magic helms which confer near invulnerability plus something very like a heroin jag, while distancing them from the kindlier human feelings.

The tone is set early on, when a detachment visits the home of farmer Egil (a dead ringer for Druss, incidentally, though he never truly emerges as a character; Millennium is pushing Nichols as the next David Gemmell, and not without reason). They are killing him by laceration, but interrupt themselves to ravish his wife and immolate her (along with his cottage), leaving him for dead. Meanwhile young Tai, the principal viewpoint, has been dragged off to provide 'sport' for the Lords. This involves being torn to pieces, not once but many times, courtesy of another unpleasant piece of magic – except

that he has an unsuspected talent (so far manifest only as *grand mal* seizures) which makes him valuable to Tancred, the Lords' Seer.

No one in this book enjoys even the most transitory happiness until page 152, when a third viewpoint character, Jonaquil the Healer, feels the satisfaction of a healing job well done – but only for a moment, before she is forced, first to partake of griefs not her own, then to suffer unnatural rape. No other form of sex is featured, incidentally, and the principal love interest lies between creatures of dissimilar species, neither of whom survives the final conflict. The ending is predictably low-key.

For all the misery, TWotLV has a certain fascination which kept me turning the pages, if only to find out how the author proposed turning the tables on such seemingly invincible villainy; but a writer who concentrates so single-mindedly on the unhappier aspects of life needs a dignified diction. In general Nichols achieves this well enough; his inventive and descriptive powers are both of a high order, but his command of the language shows some lacunae. If you find there is no exact term for the concept you have in mind you must do something creative, like make up a new one, employ metaphor or invent a synaesthetic analogy; it is not sufficient simply to italicise a near approximation. Nor was that the worst: in order to heighten the seriousness at certain points, he has his characters adopt the archaic ceremonial form of the second person singular. He has not, however, learnt the very simple rules that govern it, and since no one at Millennium knows them either we get this:

'Sleep,' he said his quiet way. 'Thou needs rest, old woman.'
Crane smiled. 'So does thee, old man.'

Grammarians may be thin on the ground, but ain't there a Quaker in the house? I've railed at this sort of thing often enough to bore myself, but here we have an exceptionally crass example marring what is otherwise a book of some quality and formidable promise. For a reader with any feeling for the language it signals a descent from high tragedy to low and unfunny farce. Of course, the world is full of people who couldn't give a rap about such matters, but as they don't shell out £16 a time for hardbacks, I don't propose to defer to them.

By yet another coincidence, Collin (sic) Webber shows an incomplete command of the second person in *Ribwash* (Gollancz £5.99). It matters less; his errors are no less gross, but it's a book of far less pretension, being an immediate sequel to his agreeable *Merlin and the Last Trump*

(briefly noticed by John Clute in *Interzone* 72). I note, by the way, that Gollancz have elected to issue it as a paperback original this time, suggesting that the first book was less successful than they'd hoped. If that's the case I blame Ainslie MacLeod's covers, which are just like Josh Kirby only without the talent.

Certainly, those interested should read the earlier book first, lest they find themselves in the position of the two principal viewpoints, Sir Griswold des Arbres and James Dimmot. As a side effect of Merlin's attempts to get the universe back on course both have lost their memories of how they helped to save it last time, which would be more confusing all round if Webber didn't get them restored pretty quick.

As before, the plotting is fairly chaotic, nor is it any help that thanks to time-travel the participants are anything from two days to 300 years older since the end of the last book, and that a fair proportion of the most physically active are ghosts. In the circumstances, why should anyone worry about getting killed? On this occasion the shit is due to hit the fan in AD 4097, but the interested parties massing in contemporary Hell (under Archeous, Lucifer's deputy and designated heir) and Gnomedon (planet of the Gnomes, where the evil magician Grandeanne is brewing the traditional four flavours of nastiness) are really no closer to the centre of things than Merlin and Griswold (from AD 570) and Dimmot (from 1994). Apart from Grandeanne only Merlin has a complete vision of what's going on, which is no less than an assertion of the Manichaean Heresy (which will be familiar to those who have read James Blish's *A Case of Conscience* – those who have not, get with it).

This is no small theme, but its underlying seriousness is less prone to surface and torpedo all the slapstick and bawdry than happened in the previous book; much of the very considerable violence is on a par with Bugs Bunny. How you react to the mixture is very much for the individual. My own view is that the tension between manner and matter lends the books a certain charm, but I have no quarrel with anyone who finds the juxtaposition of serious theology and that sort of humour distasteful, or who objects to the insertion of such heavy contraband into what is otherwise a frothy frolic. In this connection the ending is distinctly abrupt, leaving plenty of loose ends, so I presume there'll be at least one more sequel, but it's difficult to see how the series can ever end – short of Armageddon, which Robert Rankin has already played for laughs.

Chris Gilmore

Books Received

January – February 1995

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Barnes, John. **Mother of Storms.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-244-4, 455pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 86.) 16th March 1995.

Beckford, William. **The Episodes of Vathek.** Edited by Malcolm Jack. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-61-5, 207pp, B-format paperback, cover by Lise Weisgerber, £6.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in 1912; these three lengthy "Oriental" tales were written in the 1780s as part of an intended continuation of the author's brilliant horror-fantasy *Vathek* [1786]; however, they were never published in his lifetime; this edition contains the 1912 translation [from Beckford's French] by Frank T. Marzials, "with minor corrections and alterations.") 24th February 1995.

Brosnan, John. **Damned and Fancy.** "Sexier than *Blackadder*, funnier than *Robin Hood*!" Legend, ISBN 0-09-951221-1, 188pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Lee, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) April 1995.

Burnell, Mark. **Freak.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-61760-8, 306pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Avon, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1994.) 16th March 1995.

Burnell, Mark. **Glittering Savages.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-61782-9, 266pp, hardcover, cover by John Avon, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; its author's second book.) 16th March 1995.

Butler, Octavia E. **Parable of the Sower.** Women's Press, ISBN 0-7043-4421-1, 299pp, B-format paperback, cover by Deborah Gyan, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1993; this one was a *succes d'estime* in America, and is the first new Butler title to appear in Britain for some years; Women's Press are reissuing her earlier novel *Kindred* on the same date, but haven't sent us a copy.) 23rd February 1995.

Card, Orson Scott. **Earthborn: Homecoming, Volume 5.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-93040-2, 375pp, hardcover, £23.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; no, you haven't seen this listed here before: this fifth and final volume in Card's religiose saga of 40 million years hence appears just three months after the fourth part.) May 1995.

Clark, Simon. **Nailed by the Heart.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-62572-4, 294pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut novel by a new British writer, born 1958.) 2nd March 1995.

Corran, Mary. **Fate.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-273-8, 363pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 16th March 1995.

Corran, Mary. **Imperial Light.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-217-7, 358pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 87.) 16th March 1995.

Crumey, Andrew. **Pfitz.** Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-81-X, 164pp, B-format paperback, cover by Lise Weisgerber, £7.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first edition; this is a second book by a new British writer, born 1961; according to the blurb, it "explores the no-mans-land between reality and imagination," and is reminiscent of "the philosophical tales of Diderot and Voltaire.") 16th March 1995.

Davies, Paul. **Are We Alone? Philosophical Implications of the Discovery of Extraterrestrial Life.** Penguin, ISBN 0-14-024585-5, xii+109pp,

B-format paperback, £5.99. (Popular science text, first edition; this is basically the ancient "plurality of worlds" debate revisited in the light of modern knowledge; inevitably, it contains much reference to sf.) 2nd February 1995.

Donaldson, Stephen. **The Gap Into Madness: Chaos and Order.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-647022-X, 743pp, A-format paperback, cover by David O'Connor, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; fourth in the "Gap" series.) 20th February 1995.

Douglas, John. **The Late Show.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-62471-X, 267pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1994.) 16th March 1995.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. **The Lost World and The Poison Belt.** "Pocket Classics." Biographical note by Nicholas Mander. Alan Sutton, ISBN 0-7509-0822-X, vii+291pp, B-format paperback, cover by John Martin, £5.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition [?]; the two novels were originally published in 1912 and 1913; we're not sure if they have appeared in one volume in this fashion before [other than in the much larger John Murray omnibus entitled *The Professor Challenger Stories*, 1952]; this is of one of a series of cheaply produced but reasonably attractive sf classics issued by Alan Sutton — for others, see below under Jack London, Lord Lytton and Jules Verne.) 23rd March 1995.

Edwards, Graham. **Dragoncharm.** "The ultimate dragon saga." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648021-7, 504pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer, born 1965.) 6th February 1995.

Franklin, H. Bruce, ed. **Future Perfect: American Science Fiction of the Nineteenth Century.** Revised and expanded edition. Rutgers University Press, ISBN 0-8135-2152-1, 395pp, trade paperback, \$15.95. (Annotated, scholarly sf anthology; the first edition appeared in 1966, and a second in 1978; this third edition appears to have been expanded mainly by the addition of a section on

women's writing; among the many 19th-century authors represented are Edward Bellamy, Ambrose Bierce, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Irving, Herman Melville, Fitz-James O'Brien, Edgar Allan Poe and Mark Twain; recommended.) 13th February 1995.

Gallagher, Stephen. **Red, Red Robin.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03803-7, 366pp, hardcover, £9.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; reviewed, from an advance proof, by Pete Crowther in *Interzone* 92.) 9th February 1995.

Gemmell, David A. **Bloodstone.** "The new John Shannon novel." Legend, ISBN 0-09-935531-0, 298pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mike Posen, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994.) 16th February 1995.

Gemmell, David. **Ironhand's Daughter.** "First Book of the Hawk Queen." Legend, ISBN 0-09-935491-8, 283pp, hardcover, cover by Ciruelo Cabral, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the middle "A" has finally fallen from Gemmell's name on the title page of this book.) 16th February 1995.

Gemmell, David. **The King Beyond the Gate.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-37905-5, 307pp, A-format paperback, cover by Royo, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1985.) 1st February 1995.

Gerrold, David. **The Middle of Nowhere.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56189-8, 309pp, A-format paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; it's a sequel to something called *Voyage of the Star Wolf*, which we never saw; Gerrold is one of those fairly prolific, "invisible" American sf authors that British publishers seem to have given up on [his early novels appeared in this country from Faber & Faber, no less].) April 1995.

Gorman, Ed. **Cages: A Collection of Stories.** Introduction by Marcia Muller. Deadline Press [PO Box 2808, Apache Junction, AZ 85217, USA], ISBN 0-9631367-6-3, xii+370pp, hardcover, cover by Carlos Batts, \$35. (Crime/horror/sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; 21 stories, at least five of which are

previously unpublished; this is a 500-copy limited edition.) *Announced for February 1995 and proof received in that month (although we suspect finished copies may not be ready until later).*

Grant, Charles L. **Jackals**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-62479-5, 255pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Avon, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 16th March 1995.

Grant, Charles L. **The Tea Party**. Raven, ISBN 1-85487-347-4, 312pp, A-format paperback, cover by Luis Rey, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1985.) 28th February 1995.

Green, George Dawes. **The Caveman**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0722-9, 374pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in the USA, 1994; a debut book by a new American writer; reviewed by Pete Crowther in *Interzone* 86.) 9th March 1995.

Grimwood, Ken. **Into the Deep**. Morrow, ISBN 0-688-08799-X, 358pp, hardcover, cover by Brian Leister, \$20. (Sf novel, first edition; many of us who read and were impressed by the World Fantasy Award-winning *Replay* [1986] must have wondered who the mysterious Ken Grimwood was and if he had written anything else; well, here's something new at last: an "eco-thriller" about intelligent dolphins, together with the information that the author has written three other books — *The Voice Outside*, *Elise* and *Breakthrough* [although there's no hint as to what sort of books these are].) 24th February 1995.

Hamilton, Peter F. **The Nano Flower**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-33044-4, 566pp, A-format paperback, cover by Larry Rostant, £4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; follow-up to *Mindstar Rising* and *A Quantum Murder* in the "Greg Mandel" trilogy.) 10th March 1995.

Harbinson, W. A. **Phoenix: Projekt Saucer, Book Two**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-61751-3, 568pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £5.99. (Sf/horror novel, first edition.) 16th February 1995.

Harrison, Harry, and John Holm. **One King's Way**. "Bestselling sequel to *The Hammer and the Cross*." Legend, ISBN 0-09-930306-X, 426pp, hardcover, cover by Mick Posen, £15.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first

edition; its says "1994" inside, but the book was delayed to this year; "John Holm" is a pseudonym of Professor Tom Shippey.) 16th February 1995.

Hobb, Robin. **Assassin's Apprentice: The Farseer**. "An irresistible new voice in high fantasy." Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-37445-1, 356pp, trade paperback, \$12.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by a new writer, presumably American.) 17th April 1995.

Holdstock, Robert. **Merlin's Wood, or The Vision of Magic**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648001-2, 286pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994; The book also contains two short stories; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 93.) 20th March 1995.

Hopen, Stuart. **Warp Angel**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85903-1, 288pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by a new American writer who is praised by Lawrence Watt-Evans and others; it seems, on the face of it, to be some kind of religious space opera.) May 1995.

Horwood, William. **The Wolves of Time, I: Journeys to the Heartland**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-223677-X, 490pp, hardcover, cover by Geoff Taylor, £14.99. (Animal fantasy novel, first edition; a mighty saga about talking wolves, first of a trilogy; the accompanying publicity describes it as "the first positive portrayal of wolves from a major fiction writer since Jack London"; how can the publishers be so forgetful of their very own Garry Kilworth, author of *Midnight's Sun: A Story of Wolves*, 1990?) 23rd February 1995.

Hunter, Jack D. **Slingshot**. Tor/Forge, ISBN 0-312-85500-1, 381pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Near-future thriller, first edition; the author turns out to be the man who wrote the First World War adventure novel *The Blue Max*, 30 years ago.) 4th January 1995.

Irwin, Robert. **Exquisite Corpse**. Dedalus, ISBN 1-873982-86-0, 235pp, hardcover, cover by Lise Weisgerber, £14.99. (Literary fantasy novel, first edition; Irwin's first new novel in several years, it's set in the post-World War II years and is blurbled as being about "sex, surrealism, hypnagogic imagery, waxworks, Mass Observation, Nazi art, mesmerism and

madness" — among other things.) 23rd March 1995.

Jones, Jenny. **The Blue Manor**. "A Dark Romance." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05818-8, 352pp, hardcover, cover by J. Atkinson Grimshaw, £15.99. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received.) 25th May 1995.

Jones, Mark. **Black Lightning**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05899-4, 299pp, hardcover, cover by Trevor Webb, no price shown. (Near-future thriller, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by a new British writer; it's about a super-weapon which allows a resurgent Russia to threaten the west.) 11th May 1995.

Kerr, Katharine. **Freeze Frames**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21671-5, 280pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; it's more of a "story cycle" or fix-up than a novel proper, and incorporates the novella *Resurrection*, originally published as a separate small book in 1992; another of the sections, "Asylum," appeared in *Interzone* 90; originally scheduled for December 1994, but delayed until now; the title was announced as *Freeze frames*, and it's given that way on the cover, but the title page has it in the form of two distinct words.) 6th March 1995.

Kerr, Katharine. **Freeze Frames**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-89004-3, 285pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf "fix-up" novel, first published in the UK, 1995; proof copy received.) May 1995.

King, Stephen. **Different Seasons**. "Now a major motion picture... *The Shawshank Redemption*." Warner, ISBN 0-7515-1462-4, 560pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novella collection, first published in the USA, 1982; the 15th Futura/Warner printing — this one, of course, is the film tie-in edition, with a new cover.) 16th February 1995.

Lackey, Mercedes, and Larry Dixon. **The Black Gryphon**. Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-237-1, 330pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Barber, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 2nd February 1995.

La Plante, Richard. **Leopard**. Warner, ISBN 0-7515-0135-2, 388pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in 1993.) 23rd March 1995.

La Plante, Richard. **Steroid Blues**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-91090-2, 341pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; it's set in "the drug-ridden world of hard-core bodybuilding," and concerns "a deadly confrontation between two drug-enhanced supermen.") 23rd March 1995.

Lerner, Fred. **A Bookman's Fantasy: How Science Fiction Became Respectable, and Other Essays**. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 0-915368-65-X, 97pp, small-press paperback, cover by Merle Insinga, \$11.95. (Essay collection about sf and fantasy, first edition; it consists of short, moderately wise and witty, pieces mainly reprinted from American fanzines whose titles are obscure to us; here's an example of one of the author's *bon mots*, as reproduced on the back cover: "Life is short, and shelving is finite... so I purged my collection of every paperback whose title or cover showed any sign of elf or dwarf, wizard or swordsman, dragon or unicorn... I found it a tremendously liberating experience.") February 1995.

Lethem, Jonathan. **Gun, With Occasional Music**. New English Library, ISBN 0-340-63225-9, 262pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; this paperback has an effective cover with a pleasing gold-and-brown colour scheme, but the publishers don't tell us the artist's name; we're amused by the author's brief biography inside: "Jonathan Lethem was born in the 1960s, watched television in the 1970s, and started writing in the 1980s.") 16th February 1995.

Light, John. **The Well of Time**. Photon Press [29 Longfield Rd., Tring, Herts. HP23 4DG], ISBN 1-897968-11-6, 175pp, small-press paperback, £4. (Sf novel, first published in 1981; apparently, this was the debut novel, originally a Robert Hale hardcover, of a British writer now best known for his small-press work.) Late entry: 1994 publication, received in February 1995.

London, Jack. **The Scarlet Plague and Other Stories**. "Pocket Classics." Biographical note by Sheila Michell. Alan Sutton, ISBN 0-7509-0879-3, x+115pp, B-format paperback, cover by Joseph Paul Pettit, £4.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1915; the title story is one of the author's best; of the other five pieces

here, three are sf and two appear to be mainstream adventure stories.) 23rd March 1995.

[Lytton, Lord] Bulwer-Lytton, Edward. **The Coming Race.** "Pocket Classics." Biographical introduction by Julian Wolfreys. Alan Sutton, ISBN 0-7509-0823-8, viii+120pp, B-format paperback, cover by Joachim Patenier, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1871; the author's name is given on the cover as "E. G. E. Bulwer-Lytton," which is not a way we've seen it presented before; a famous scientific romance which, to the best of our knowledge, has not been available in UK paperback before — although there was a nice little Oxford "World's Classics" hardcover edition many years ago.) 23rd March 1995.

McCaffrey, Anne, and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough. **Power Play.** Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03360-4, 306pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Elson, £14.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; sequel to the same authors' *Powers That Be and Power Lines*.) 6th April 1995.

Mason, Roger. **Billions of Prayers About Atoms.** Merlin [40 East St., Braunton, Devon EX33 2EA], ISBN 0-86303-698-8, 144pp, small-press paperback, £8.95. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; the title page attributes the book to Roger Mason, but the cover says it's by "Victoria and Roger Mason"; however, schizophrenia is apparently a theme of the book, so there may be some deliberate game going on here; an oddity, probably a vanity-press product.) Late entry: 1994 publication, received in January 1995.

Mohan, Kim, ed. **Amazing Stories: The Anthology.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-89048-6, 320pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; the veteran magazine *Amazing Stories* [founded 1926; now owned by TSR Inc.] has reportedly ceased publication [again]; if so, this book makes a good memorial, with its choice of mainly recent material by Gregory Benford, Robert Bloch [story and essay], Thomas M. Disch, Paul Di Filippo [a "Philip K. Dick" story], Alan Dean Foster, R. A. Lafferty, Ursula Le Guin, George Zebrowski and others; but where have we heard a title with that ring before? — ah, yes, it was *Interzone*: The Anthology [Dent, 1985; John Clute suggested it.] May 1995.

Nagata, Linda. **The Bohr Maker.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56925-2, 325pp, A-format

paperback, \$4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by a new American writer, resident in Hawaii.) April 1995.

Nahin, Paul J. **Time Machines: Time Travel in Physics, Metaphysics, and Science Fiction.** Oxford University Press, ISBN 1-56396-371-X, xvii+408pp, C-format paperback, £12.95. (Popular science text, with extensive reference to science fiction; first published in the USA, 1993; the author is both an engineering prof and an sf writer, with past story sales to *Analog*, *Omni*, etc; this is actually the American Institute of Physics edition, second printing, distributed in the UK by Oxford U.P.) Late entry: October 1994 publication, received in February 1995.

Niven, Larry, Jerry Pournelle and Steven Barnes. **The Dragons of Heorot.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05659-2, 447pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Mennim, £15.99. (Sf novel, first edition [?]; proof copy received; sequel to the same authors' *The Legacy of Heorot*; the ubiquitous Dr Jack Cohen is acknowledged for his technical assistance; see John Clute's cod review of an imaginary third novel in the series, *Interzone* 94.) 27th April 1995.

Noon, Jeff. **Vurt.** Crown, ISBN 0-517-59991-0, 342pp, hardcover, \$22. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1993; winner of the 1994 Arthur C. Clarke Award for best novel, now released with some fanfare in the USA.) 28th February 1995.

Ouellette, Pierre. **The Deus Machine.** New English Library, ISBN 0-450-60398-9, 446pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 16th March 1995.

Parsons, Rich, and Tony Keaveny. **Krap the Conqueror.** O'Mara, ISBN 1-85479-962-2, x+150pp, A-format paperback, cover by Robin Lawrie, £3.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; follow-up to *Colin the Librarian* [1983 — the same year, please note, that Terry Pratchett published his rather similar *The Colour of Magic*, so these guys can hardly be accused of being Pratchett imitators]; the accompanying publicity describes the new book as "Conan meets Adrian Mole," which seems appropriate.) 24th February 1995.

Powers, Tim. **Expiration Date.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21856-4, 616pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel,

first edition [?]; we've not heard of this one coming out in America, though it's possibly in a small-press edition over there, and we tend not to receive those; so this may be a world first; whether it's a first or not, we're sure many *Interzone* readers will want to grab it.) 20th March 1995.

Pritchard, John. **Angels of Mourning.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648013-6, 434pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; the second novel by a new British writer, born 1964.) 20th March 1995.

Schlobin, Roger C., and Irene R. Harrison. **Andre Norton: A Primary and Secondary Bibliography.** Revised edition. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 0-915368-64-1, xxvii+92pp, small-press paperback, £12.50. (Sf/fantasy author bibliography; the first edition appeared in 1980; an excellent annotated listing of an extremely prolific and popular writer.) No date shown: late 1994 publication, received in February 1995.

Silverberg, Robert. **The Mountains of Majipoor.** Macmillan, ISBN 0-333-63319-9, 165pp, hardcover, cover by Jim Burns, £12.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 10th March 1995.

Sinclair, Alison. **Legacies.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-264-9, 330pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Gudyas, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer who has a PhD in biochemistry, it seems to be fairly hard sf.) 9th February 1995.

Skal, David J. **The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror.** Plexus [26 Dafforne Rd., London SW17 8TZ], ISBN 0-85965-211-4, 432pp, C-format paperback, £12.99. (Study of horror movies, mainly American, and attendant cultural phenomena such as TV, cartoons, etc; first published in the USA, 1993; it looks to be an interesting book, as was the same author's earlier *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen*.) Late entry: no date shown, but published in the UK late 1994; received in February 1995.

Stableford, Brian. **Algebraic Fantasies and Realistic Romances: More Masters of Science Fiction.** "The Milford Series: Popular Writers of Today, Volume 54." Borgo Press, ISBN 0-89370-283-8, 128pp, small-press paperback, no price

shown. (Collection of essays on sf and fantasy writers; first edition; it contains seven reprinted pieces, plus notes, bibliography and index; two of the essays, on Douglas Adams and Stephen R. Donaldson, first appeared in *Interzone* [in our "Big Sellers" series of a few years ago]; most of the others are from *Foundation*; recommended.) No date shown: received in February 1995.

Stableford, Brian. **Firefly: A Novel of the Far Future.** "Classics of Fantastic Literature, Number One." Unicorn & Son [i.e. Borgo Press], ISBN 0-89370-476-8, 136pp, small-press paperback, no price shown. (Sf novel, first edition; this was cobbled together in 1971 from stories Stableford had written several years earlier, in his mid-teens [one of those stories was his first-ever sale, "Beyond Time's Aegis," *Science Fantasy*, November 1965]; the book failed to find a publisher in 1971, so it appears here for the first time, nearly a quarter of a century later; an example of juvenilia, obviously, but fascinating; in an afterword, the author says: "The ridiculous, incompetent and introverted child who wrote the bits of this book, and the alienated, incompetent, bitter young man who patched the bits together, both wanted to write something different from anything which had ever been written before... They wanted to write, to produce, and to experience something deep and strange and comforting. I still try, time and time again... to do the same thing.") No date shown: late 1994 publication, received in February 1995.

Stephenson-Payne, Phil, and Gordon Benson, Jr. **Philip Kindred Dick: Metaphysical Conjuror—A Working Bibliography.** 4th edition. 2 volumes. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader Volume 18." Galactic Central Publications [25A Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-42-4, 154pp, paperbound, £6. (Sf author bibliography; the first edition was published in 1986; volume two of this new edition consists of a copious secondary bibliography; it all looks to be very thorough, and these bibliographers have a reputation for reliability, so ... highly recommended to all Dick enthusiasts.) February 1995.

Thornley, Diane. **Ganwold's Child.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85843-4, 351pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book, described as "military sf adventure," by a

new American writer, and the first of a series to be called "Unified Worlds.") May 1995.

Turtledove, Harry. **Worldwar: In the Balance.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38852-6, 565pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stan Watts, \$5.99. (Alternative-history sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 1st February 1995.

Turtledove, Harry. **Worldwar: Tilting the Balance.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-63239-9, 482pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Alternative-history sf novel, first

edition; sequel to *Worldwar: In the Balance*.) 2nd March 1995.

Turtledove, Harry. **Worldwar: Tilting the Balance.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38997-2, xi+478pp, hardcover, \$22. (Alternative-history sf novel, first published in the UK, 1995; proof copy received.) 20th March 1995.

Verne, Jules. **From Earth to Moon and a Trip Round It.** "Pocket Classics." Introduction by Victoria Acland. Alan Sutton, ISBN 0-7509-0824-6, xi+208pp, B-format paperback, cover by Donato Creti, £5.99. (Sf

omnibus, first published in 1907; the two novels were originally published in French in 1865 and 1870; we're not told whose English translation this is, but it seems to date from a combined edition of 1907.) 23rd March 1995.

Weinberg, Robert. **A Modern Magician.** "The First Book of Today's Sorcery." Raven, ISBN 1-85487-344-X, 232pp, A-format paperback, cover by Walter Velez, £4.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1993; the author is a well-known American book-dealer, small-

press publisher, critic and non-fiction writer; this looks to be an exercise in the same vein as de Camp and Pratt's "Harold Shea" stories of the 1940s; indeed, de Camp commends it on the cover.) 7th February 1995.

Wurts, Janny. **That Way Lies Camelot.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648003-9, 381pp, A-format paperback, cover by Janny Wurts, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in the USA [?], 1994; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 89.) 20th February 1995.

SPINOFFERY

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.

Allen, Roger MacBride. **Ambush at Corellia: Book One of the Corellian Trilogy.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40881-X, viii+308pp, A-format paperback, cover by Drew Struzan, £4.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 9th March 1995.

Baxter, Stephen. **The Time Ships.** "The sequel to *The Time Machine*." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-224026-2, 446pp, hardcover, cover by Les Edwards, £15.99. (Sf sequel by another hand, first edition; proof copy received; this is Baxter's hundredth-anniversary tribute to H. G. Wells's debut scientific romance; it's a surprisingly bulky book, considering that the novel which it sequelizes was very short.) 27th April 1995.

Blythe, Daniel. **Infinite Requiem.** "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20437-9, 274pp, A-format paperback, cover by Barry Jones, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) 16th March 1995.

Grant, Charles. **The X-Files: Goblins.** "Based on America's boldest new TV series!" HarperPrism, ISBN 0-06-105414-3, 277pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf/horror television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994; based on the characters created by scriptwriter Chris Carter; as

far as the not-bad TV series is concerned, one could comment a little sourly that American television seems to have discovered the "Quatermass" factor at last, 40 years after we in Britain thrilled to Nigel Kneale's serials [unless Rod Serling was the one who got there first with such series as *The Twilight Zone*]; this book is the December 1994 American edition with a British price, distributed in this country by HarperCollins; it's the first "HarperPrism" title we've ever seen — they are the American paperback publishers of Terry Pratchett, Steve Baxter and others.) 20th March 1995.

Gravel, Geary. **The Dreamwright: Might and Magic, Book One.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38292-7, 248pp, A-format paperback, cover by Kevin Murphy, \$4.99. (Fantasy computer-game spinoff novel, first edition; it's based on a game produced by New World Computing, and it's copyright "Bill Fawcett & Associates" [a packaging company].) 1st February 1995.

Hambly, Barbara. **Children of the Jedi.** "Star Wars." Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-08930-7, 345pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first edition; proof copy received; a first dip of her toe into the "Star Wars" universe by Hambly, who has previously written three "Star Trek" novels plus many well-respected fantasies of a more original kind.) May 1995.

Letts, Barry. **The Ghosts of N-Space.** "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20434-4, 264pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition;

this one is actually the novelization of a BBC radio play; the author has written previous "Who" novels and scripts, and was producer of the TV series in the early 1970s.) 16th February 1995.

Lofficier, Jean-March and Randy. **Into the Twilight Zone: The Rod Serling Programme Guide.** Virgin, ISBN 0-86369-844-1, 296pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy television-series guide, first edition; a useful volume, covering not only "classic" *Twilight Zone*, and the similar later series *Night Gallery*, but also the more recent revivals, including interviews with writers such as Richard Matheson and Alan Brennert; in addition, there's an annotated listing of all Rod Serling's other TV and movie work: Serling [1924-75] was considered a major mainstream screenwriter back in the days of American TV's "live" Golden Age, the 1950s — along with such other leading lights as Paddy Chayefsky, J. P. Miller, Reginald Rose and novelist Jonathan Carroll's father, Sidney Carroll; recommended.) 16th March 1995.

Lyons, Steve. **Time of Your Life.** "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20438-7, 277pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Campbell, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) 16th March 1995.

Murdoch, Jim. **Rise of the Robots: The Book.** Roc, ISBN 0-45-118566-8, 310pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf computer-game novelization, first edition; it's copyright "Mirage Technologies [Multimedia] Ltd"; this is the debut novel of a new British writer, born 1956.) February 1995?

Orman, Kate. **Set Piece.** "The New Doctor Who Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20436-0, 241pp, A-format paperback, cover by Tony Masero, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) 16th February 1995.

Rigelsford, Adrian. **The Doctors: 30 Years of Time Travel.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0959-0, 192pp, hardcover, £14.99. (Large-format illustrated history of the *Doctor Who* television series; first edition; it says "1994" inside but seems to have been delayed from that date.) 23rd February 1995.

Sky, Kathleen. **Death's Angel.** "Star Trek Adventures, 10." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-536-9, 213pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £4.50. (Sf television-and-film-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1981.) 16th February 1995.

Stone, Dave. **Networks.** "Judge Dredd." Virgin, ISBN 0-352-32975-0, 264pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steve Sampson, £4.99. (Sf spinoff novel, first edition; based on the comic strip which originated in 2000 A.D. magazine; this appears to be the ninth "Dredd" novel and the third by Dave Stone; although we received the first two, back in 1993, the publishers have not been sending us this series for review; the present book came from the author, who is an *Interzone* subscriber; we note with interest that among the other writers of novels in this series over the past year or so are fantasy authors Stephen Marley and "John Grant.") 16th February 1995.

SMALL ADS

can be found on page 55

Coming next month

is on page 5

JOHN BROSNAN

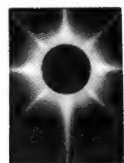
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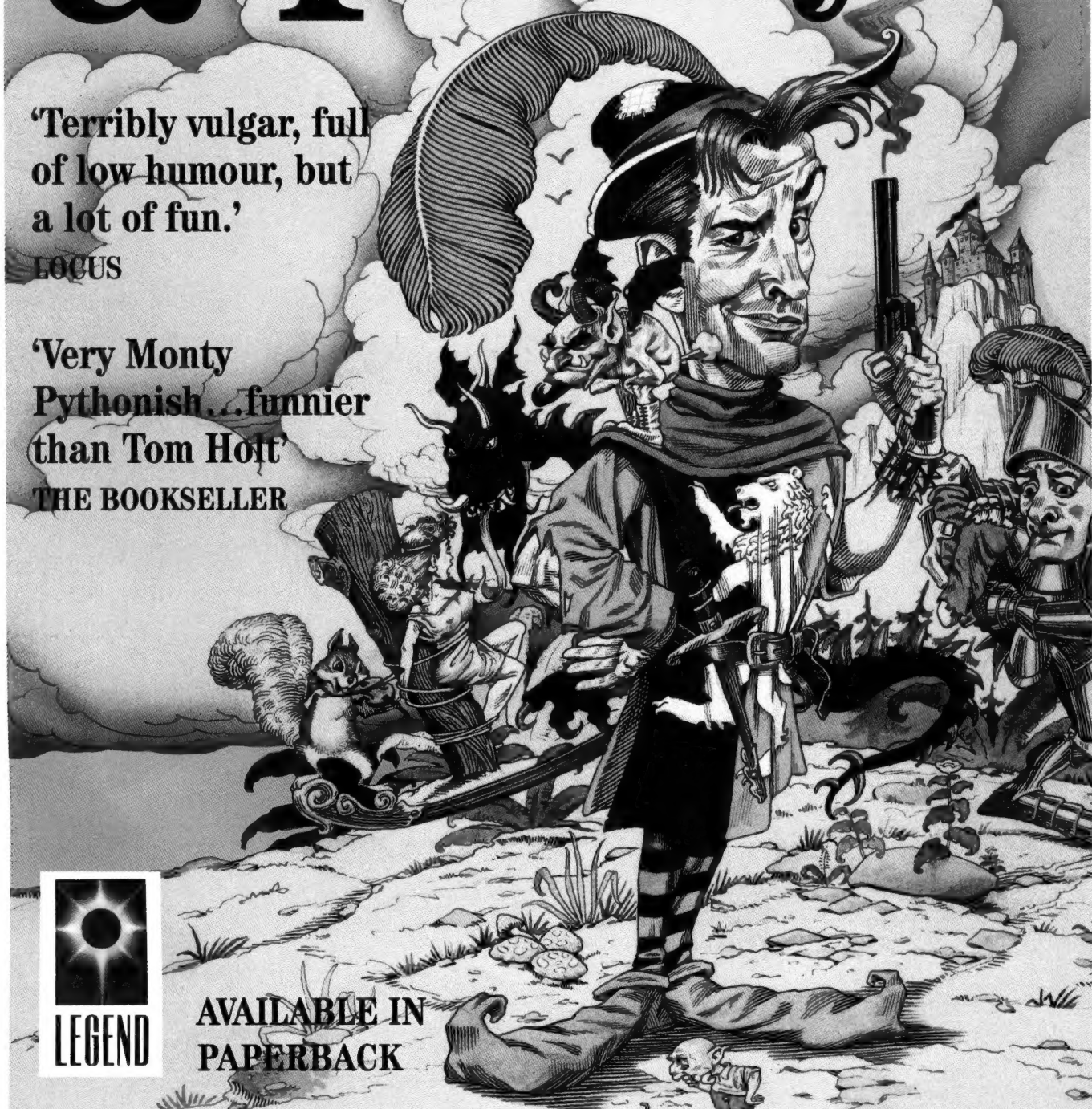
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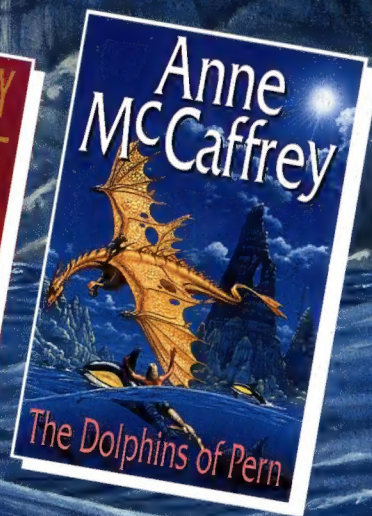
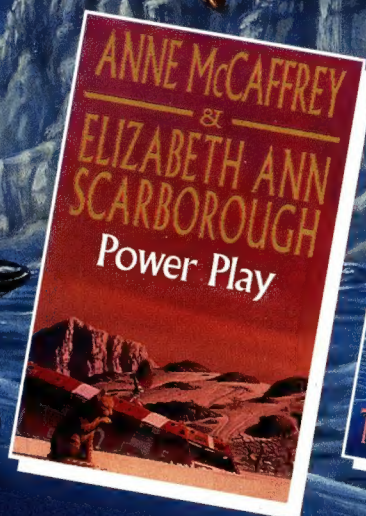


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